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THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC MAGAZINE
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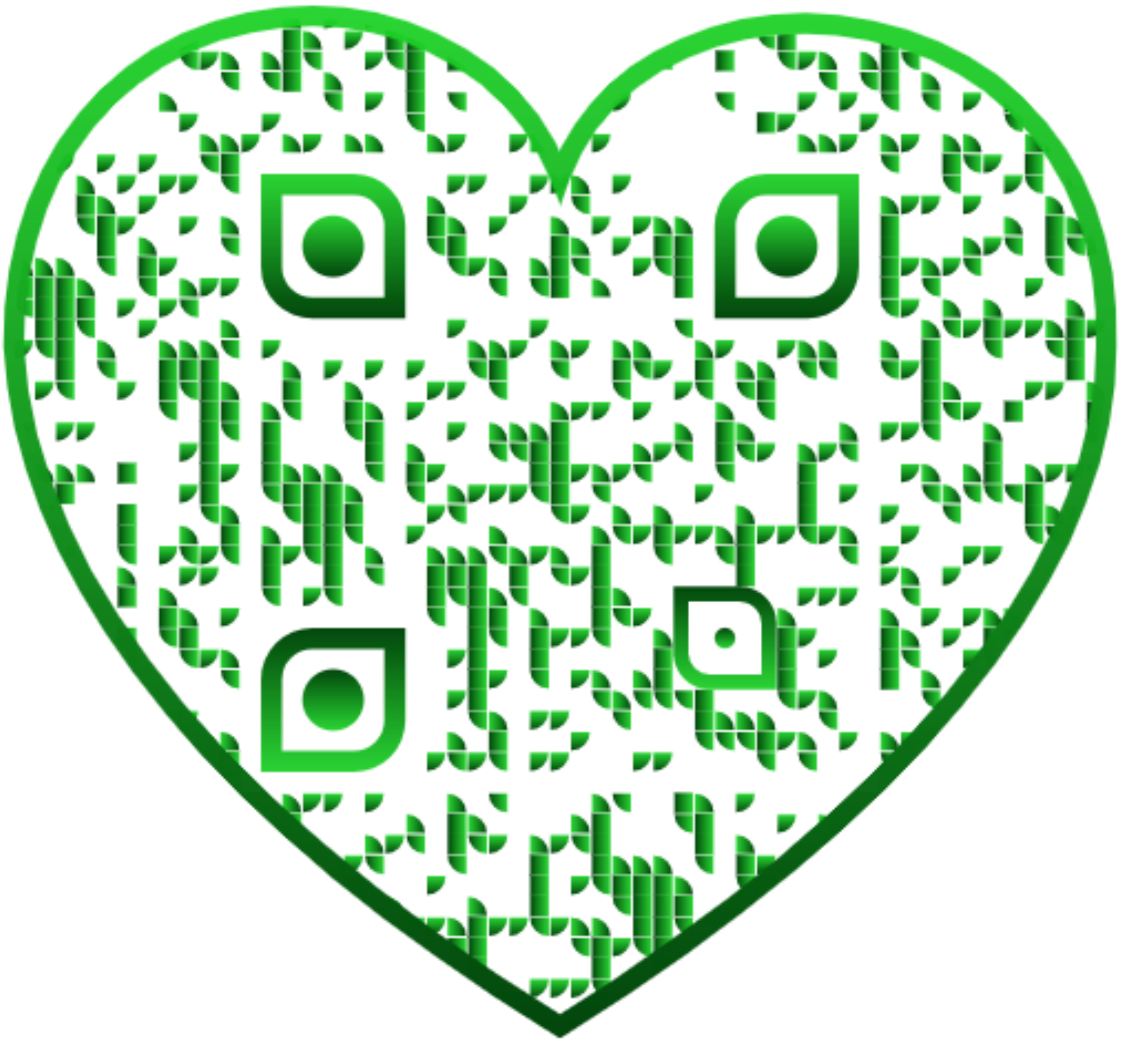
ALISON GOLDFRAPP
QUEEN OF SYNTHPOP
BLUEDOT FESTIVAL / MOBY / KID KOALA / NABIHAH IQBAL / HARALD GROSSKOPF / RICHARD X
PURPLE REIGN



102 WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

There's always been something distinctly radiant and euphoric about the music of Alison Goldfrapp, this month's cover star. She worked with Orbital and Tricky in the early days of her career, before forming the hugely successful electronic duo Goldfrapp with Will Gregory in 1999, delivering Kraftwerk-meets-glam stomps such as 'Strict Machine' and 'Ooh La La' over the next two decades. Six years after the last Goldfrapp release, she's now striking out on her own with 'The Love Invention', a late-career solo album that sees her fully re-energised and artistically reborn.

While it's no surprise that it nods to her previous work with Will, 'The Love Invention' is very much a record on Alison's own terms – a synthpop album with added oomph, the anthemic tracks rooted in the electro and house music influences that have always been part of her DNA. From the upfront disco moves of the title cut to the acid house sensuality of 'So Hard So Hot', it's a heady statement of intent that reflects an artist revelling in her own confidence.

"As an artist, I think that it's important to feel excited about what you're doing," she tells writer Dave Simpson in our cover feature. "And I'm *incredibly* excited about what I'm doing." As listeners, we should be excited as well. 'The Love Invention' is a big and gloriously effervescent record that's set to soundtrack the summer months ahead.

Speaking of the summer, be sure to also check out our 10-page preview of Bluedot 2023, the blockbusting festival of music, science and cosmic culture taking place at the Jodrell Bank Observatory in Cheshire at the end of July. The theme is "Space Carnival", so you can expect a whole load of extraterrestrial goings-on, with 'Doctor Who', David Bowie and drumming robots all playing a part. To whet your appetite, we talk to some of the names on the typically eclectic bill, including Radiophonic Workshoppers Dick Mills and Peter Howell, Pavement frontman Stephen Malkmus, and Creep Show's John Grant and Stephen Mallinder. We'll see you there for a Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster or two.

We have a mighty fine supporting cast of interviewees for this issue too, with Moby, Nabihah Iqbal, Kid Koala, Will Sergeant, Harald Grosskopf, A Man Called Adam and Richard X all under the spotlight. Richard X is one of the co-producers of Alison Goldfrapp's 'The Love Invention', by the way, which circles us back round to where we came in. And you know how we like to keep things neat and tidy.

Electronically yours,
Push and Mark

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ZODIAC

‘Soviet Bus Stops’

MAY 2023

The artistic merit of bus stops is probably not something you think about on a regular basis. But Christopher Herwig sure does, and has for the last two decades, ever since the Canadian photographer first laid eyes on one of the world’s most offbeat architectural artefacts.

“In the fall of 2002 I was on a bicycle tour from London to St Petersburg, and first came across these bus stops on some quiet country roads in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia,” says Herwig, speaking from his home in Sri Lanka. “They were interesting because they’re not what I would have expected from the Soviet Union. It was a glimpse into the minds of ordinary individuals who wanted to be creative in a repressive state.”

Two decades later and Herwig’s unique project has seen him travel over 60,000 kilometres around ex-Soviet states looking for more. It’s led to several photobooks, but this year marks the release of his ‘Soviet Bus Stops’ documentary. Seven years in the making, it features a killer soundtrack by Latvian supergroup Zodiac.

Though relatively unknown in the West, Zodiac released a number of acclaimed albums in the 1980s on Melodiya, the USSR’s state-owned record label. Led by Jānis Lūsēns, the five-piece drew inspiration from the likes of Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream and Jean-Michel Jarre, yet they forged a unique mash-up of eurodisco, funk and synthpop all without the use of any Western synths, which were banned. Instead, Zodiac built their own machine called the Felix by repurposing old electronics from the army. Their debut album ‘Disco Alliance’ still sold 20 million copies.

Released on vinyl by Fuel Publishing, the ‘Soviet Bus Stops’ soundtrack features several remastered Zodiac tracks, as well as new pieces by Lūsēns, specially commissioned for the documentary. For a story about bus stops, Zodiac’s intergalactic DIY electronics form the ideal backdrop.

“The band was formed by a bunch of music students using a homemade synthesiser,” explains Herwig. “They were experimenting, just having fun. For me, Zodiac’s cosmic sound really captures the spirit of the time, and I think the bus stops represent art and creativity in their rawest form – the experimentation and joy in exploring new ideas without caring so much if they are popular. These bus stops are small, neglected and often seen as insignificant, which for me makes them underdogs. It gives me pleasure to make them be seen as heroes.”

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Alison Goldfrapp
‘So Hard So Hot’ / ‘Gatto Gelato’
Red vinyl seven-inch

This month’s exclusive seven-inch features two blistering cuts from ‘The Love Invention’, Alison Goldfrapp’s debut solo album

‘SO HARD SO HOT’

The A-side of this month’s seven-inch, ‘So Hard So Hot’, is typical of Alison Goldfrapp’s solo output – a smouldering synthpop banger with a superb bassline and a hint of acid house about it.

“It’s so hot, it’s so hot / We should be here and now / And love what we got,” she sings, her gossamer vocals recalling 1970s disco outfits such as Andrea True Connection and Odyssey. Recorded during last summer’s heatwave in the UK, the track reflects the sudden intensity of that sultry interlude in a variety of ways.

“We had that ballistic spell, which was kind of revolting but also kind of brilliant at the same time,” explains Alison. “I must admit I was loving the feeling, so the chorus just flew out of my mouth.”

Like a lot of her new material, the lyrics are jam-packed with double entendres and double meanings. The repeated line, “Now I live my life in the sun”, for example, refers both to the rocketing temperatures across the UK and to something more personal.

“The song is a comment on the climate, but it has a sexual connotation too,” she says. “It’s about being extremely hot and being in nature, being free and embracing that.”

‘GATTO GELATO’

Flip the record over for a real electro trip – a slinky synth track with a title in Italian. In case you’re wondering, it translates as ‘Ice Cream Cat’.

Co-written with producer Richard X, ‘Gatto Gelato’ is constructed around a hypnotic sequenced rhythm that nods to Alison’s love of early electronic dance cuts like Donna Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’. It sounds pristinely current and postmodern, though, with a killer gear change halfway through.

“It was actually Rich’s idea,” reveals Alison. “We had ‘Gatto Gelato’ as a working title for a long time – it’s because there are lots of Italian house and disco influences on the track – but we liked it so much we decided to keep it. Italian DJs and producers putting something out as a white label would apparently call it a ‘gelato’, so it was a sort of nickname.

“The track was a nightmare to mix, because it has tons and tons of vocals on there. But I loved doing it and it became a template for some of the other stuff on the album.”

“I can make you feel it,” repeats Alison throughout the song. And she most certainly does.

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INTELLIJENT LIFE

Desktop semi-modular synthesiser is a big win

They may already be giants in the Eurorack modular synth world, but Canadian company Intellijel have never released a stand-alone desktop instrument until now. Their new Cascadia model is what they call a "semi-modular playground", boasting 101 patch points, 34 sliders, 16 knobs and 28 switches, with the whole lot fitting snugly onto a panel about the size of your laptop. Its many functions are also impressive, presenting a smorgasbord of top-notch circuits which draw on both East and West Coast synthesis methods, plus it has an effects loop to integrate your guitar pedals. All in all, that's £2,079 well-spent. **intellijel.com**

PULSE

YOSSARI BABY

Manc agitators press the big beats button

WHO?

Drawing on no wave, post-punk and new wave flavours, Yossari Baby are a Manchester three-piece made up of primary songwriter Tim Schiazza, guitarist Mark Javin, and French fashion designer-turned vocalist Lucie Forest. Together they craft genre-hopping tracks built on big electronic beats, gothic rhythms and dirty rock guitar, never once settling on a single idea.

WHY YOSSARI BABY?

There's a nostalgic pick 'n' mix quality to Yossari Baby's sound, a selection of the sweetest parts of 1980s and 90s synthpop, thrown in with absolute disregard for convention. Take 'Inferiority Complex', the title track of their latest album, which comes on like The Sisters Of Mercy messing around with synthwave, while 'Again' is a subtle take on This Mortal Coil's immersive dreampop, and 'It's All Up' has the jittery playfulness of an Oingo Boingo/B-52's supergroup. But they also incorporate contemporary social critique, namely in slamming the development and gentrification of Manchester since the early 2000s.

TELL US MORE...

Yossari Baby weren't so much formed as forced into being. During the pandemic, Schiazza was asked by his friend Austin Collins – who penned the official biography of Mark E Smith – to put together a livestream music event at The White Hotel in Salford. Schiazza and Forest decided to create something new, weird and representative of Manchester's changing landscape. The broadcast went down well, and as soon as The White Hotel started taking bookings again, the pair were asked to perform under their new guise. Since then, they have played at an album launch party for Acid Klaus, and gained notoriety for their wild live performances, for which Forest dons a mask as "the resident Mannequin De Marseille". Their first live tour awaits.

JAMES THORNHILL

'Inferiority Complex' is out now via Bandcamp

THE TIME BORED

An ode to the mundanity of the Doctor

'Doctor Who' is back on our screens later this year, with Russell T Davies returning as showrunner for the Time Lord's latest regeneration. If you're twiddling your thumbs and wondering what to do until then, why not take a gander at sci-fi writer J David Reed's new tome, 'We're Falling Through Space'. The fascinating book analyses the show through the prism of the everyday, as Reed explores how the story, for all its time-travelling and eye-catching aliens, "uses its larger-than-life, fantastical lens to consider how the mundane is a lot more special than we might realise". As Matt Smith's Eleventh Doctor once said: "In 900 years of time and space, I've never met anyone who wasn't important before". Order a paperback copy now for £7.50. **404ink.com**

GRIME REAPER

Pop star flogs own voice for AI manipulation

When the techno-punk future of tomorrow finally arrives, there's no doubting Grimes will be up front, cracking the whip and asking us to say cheese. After jumping on the NFT bandwagon and naming her baby Exa Dark Sideræl Musk, the artist's latest endeavour has arrived with Elf.Tech, an AI software allowing users to mimic the sound of her voice. The Canadian artist has also invited users to make music with it, promising that any royalties will be split 50/50.

"Grimes is now open source and self-replicating," she tweeted, neatly summing up the significance of her latest move. Grimes is ready. Are you? **elf.tech**

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: **DJ Hamish MacDonald**

This month I'm focusing on a person rather than a tune, to present a vital but overlooked element in the evolution of early 1980s UK electronic music – the barrier-trouncing dancefloor at infamous London goth niterie the Batcave, driven by DJ Hamish MacDonald.

Writing notes for the taboo-shattering club's 'Young Limbs Rise Again' book when it was first released, I somehow didn't give Hamish the credit he deserved, possibly because I always linked him to the awesome goth-punk trio, Sexbeat.

While Rusty Egan was spinning Visage to new romantics at Camden Palace, Hamish blasted goths with heavyweight electronic mixes by Killing Joke or Soft Cell. Playing Throbbing Gristle's 'United' amid crowd-pleasing Bauhaus, he helped fling young minds open to discover the glorious excess and debauchery that stoked the club's notoriety as it moved between Fooberts, Gossips and Soundshaft at Heaven between 1982 and 1986.

Asking Hamish for his Top 20 playlists, he supplied a typical evening's entertainment, straddling New Order's 'Ceremony', Killing Joke's 'Follow The Leaders', The Cure's 'The Walk', Depeche Mode's 'New Life', The Human League's 'Being Boiled', Soft Cell's 'Memorabilia', Alan Vega's 'Magdalena 83', Wendy Carlos' 'Ode To Joy', Tubeway Army's 'Are "Friends" Electric?', Japan's 'Quiet Life', DAF's 'Der Mussolini', Kraftwerk's 'Trans-Europe Express', David Bowie's 'The Speed Of Life', Brian Eno/David Byrne's 'The Jezebel Spirit', Devo's 'Jocko Homo', The Sisters Of Mercy's 'Alice', Ultravox's 'Quiet Men', Soft Cell's 'Tainted Dub', The Normal's 'Warm Leatherette' and Iggy Pop's club anthem 'Night Clubbing'.

Like the gigs he played for promoter John Curd, such fare sounded new and startling between live acts. Apart from trampling barriers, vital seeds for the acid house movement and backrooms were sewn by Hamish at the Batcave, and it was an honour to take up his baton after he moved on.

On the home front, the Moine Dubh event for Mr Weatherall that Nina Walsh and I organised in a disused church was magical. She has continued her vault-raiding 'Apparently Solo' EP series with three more unreleased nuggets forged at Facility 4 between 2016 and 2019, dropping the tempo to what Andrew dubbed "the drug chug" as "a leveller" after recent festive cavorting. The insidious grooves of 'This Whole Fandango', 'Heat To Meat Ratio' and 'We Two' will make a sublime summer soundtrack when the sun comes out.

LICENSED FROM Мелодия

МЕЛОДИЯ

OLEG BULOSHKIN: SACRAMENT
SOFIA GUBAIDULINA: VIVENTE-NON VIVENTE
EDUARD ARTEMYEV: MOSAIC
EDUARD ARTEMYEV: TWELVE LOOKS AT THE WORLD OF SOUND
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Echo & The Bunnymen guitarist and Glide experimentalist **Will Sergeant** muses over his formative and foremost influences

INTERVIEW: MAT SMITH

BBC TWO

"There were only three channels on the television when I was growing up – two when I was really small. BBC Two arrived in 1964, when I was six years old. To watch BBC Two you needed a special aerial on your roof. The neighbours would be like, 'Oh, they've got BBC Two over there now', or 'I see Mary up the road has got BBC Two '. It was a snobby thing for a council estate. All the TVs in our houses were rented from places like Radio Rentals. If they broke, someone from the shop would have to come out and fix it. They were always breaking or needing a new valve or something like that.

"I was drawn to the weird films they showed on BBC Two – slightly out-there hippie films like 'Easy Rider', Hammer horror movies, 'The Last Picture Show', 'Silent Running' and 'Dark Star'. I can remember watching 'Magical Mystery Tour' the night it was broadcast in colour on BBC Two in 1968. I was 10 years old, and that film felt like such a big deal. A friend had the double vinyl EP of the film soundtrack and that was the first thing that made me think music could be different from the stuff in the charts."

MELLING IT OVER

"I don't think of myself as a scouser. I grew up in Melling, a little village outside Liverpool, which is right on the border with this new town called Kirkby. We never used to risk going there because you'd get battered.

"There were a couple of little walk-throughs from Melling that came out into alleyways in Kirkby, but other than that, you'd have to drive for miles to get to it because there was no road from Melling straight there. There was a metal fence all the way around Kirkby. It was like the Berlin Wall. One of the entrances was at the top of our road – I called it Checkpoint Charlie.

"Liverpool wasn't far away, and I never resisted it. I used to go there on the bus to go shopping. Walton was on the way to Liverpool, and we'd get on our bikes and go over there too. It was probably about five or six miles – a long way to cycle when you're 11 or 12. There was a big shopping street down there with a bike shop that also sold records, which was weird. I remember buying 'School's Out' by Alice Cooper from there in 1972."

THE 1960s

"My brother and sister are older than me, and both of them moved to London. My sister sent me a purple tie-dye T-shirt – a grandad shirt with three buttons – and it felt like the ultimate hippie thing. It had an iron-on patch of Speedy Gonzalez. It was kind of kitsch and ironic to have cartoon characters on your clothes –subversive, somehow. Another time, my brother came and visited me, and he had this T-shirt with a really, really wide scoop neck which was printed with the logo of the newspaper International Times in rows.

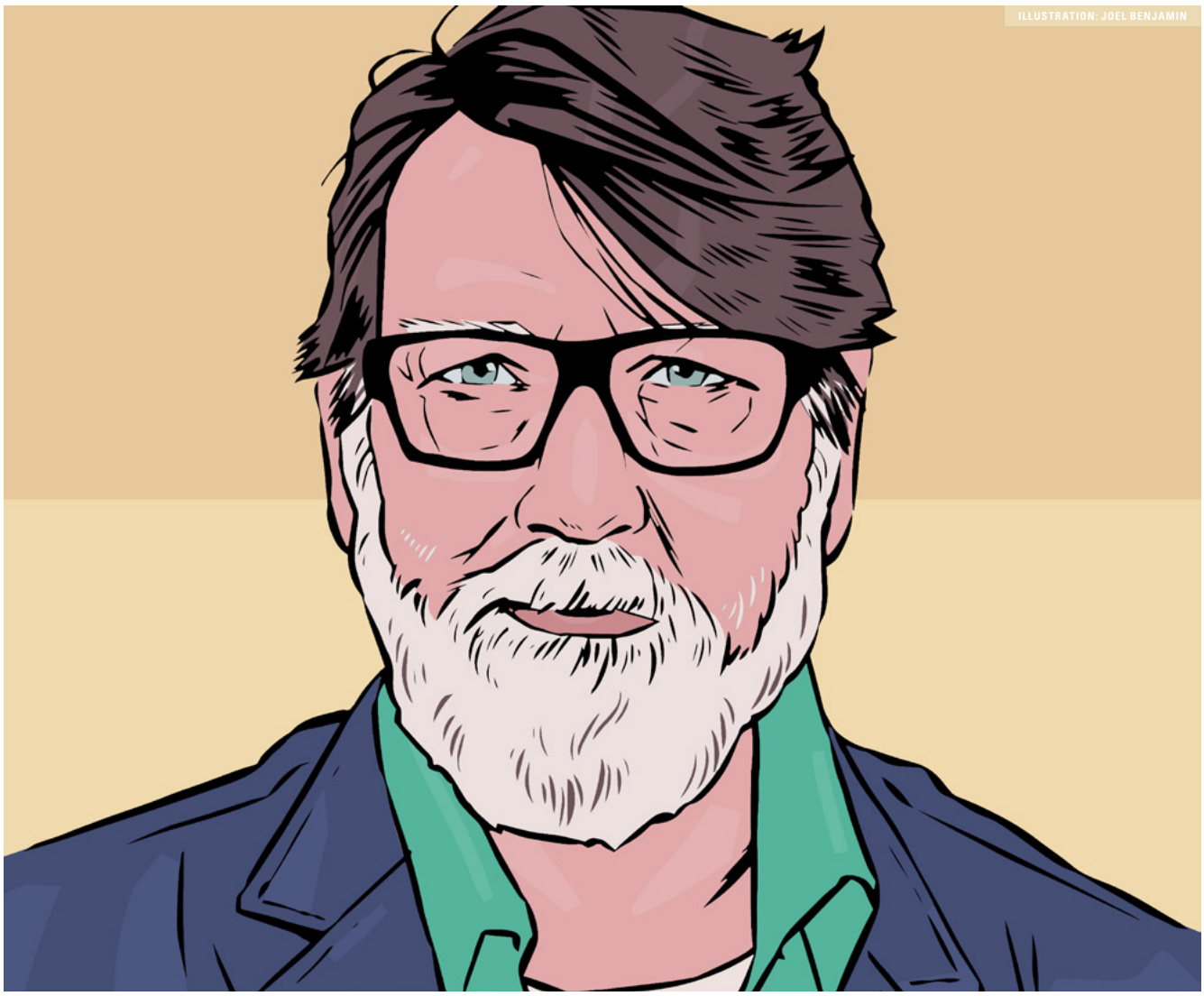
ILLUSTRATION: JOEL BENJAMIN

"The International Times was one of the underground papers in London in the 1960s, and its logo was a dead famous silent movie star called Theda Bara. I'd never seen anything like it before. The 1960s just felt inventive, and that has stuck with me.

"It wasn't all great, though. We did have Vietnam, and it was a time of rebellion. In the 1960s, stuff like the big teachers protest they had in London earlier this year happened a lot of the time. It was always hippies trying to end war and everything."

TOM VERLAINE

"Television were a massive influence on me from the very beginning, but also later when I started playing guitar. If I played something that sounded a bit like Tom Verlaine, I'd be pleased, but I wasn't going out of my way to try and do it. It was the way he played the notes – like he'd stay on the same note for too long sometimes. I like doing that. That was one of the little things that I nicked off Television in my own guitar-playing.

"To me, it always feels like bands from America can play better. They really study what they do. It's so polished. Like Nirvana – their playing was superb. It's almost like all guitarists in American bands have grown up learning how to play REO Speedwagon riffs. In Echo & The Bunnymen, we were like, 'Oh that sounds like The Fall – that'll do'."

WEIRD ELECTRONICS

"I've used a lot of synthesisers, emulators and samplers in the past. I like making music that's slightly scuzzy. One of my favourite bands is Boards Of Canada. I don't know what effect they put on some of the sounds, but it feels like when you get an old cassette and it's a bit knackered and everything sort of wobbles around. I like that, but it's also slightly unnerving – not quite right.

"Many years ago, somebody made me a cassette of 'An Electric Storm' by White Noise, which was Delia Derbyshire, Brian Hodgson and David Vorhaus, because they knew I was into weird music. It was a cassette of a cassette of a cassette and it had a really muddy sound.

The LP wasn't available anywhere, and CDs weren't invented. I went to New York in the 90s and I bought a copy of the album after it had been re-released on CD. Everything was dead clear, but I preferred the shitty cassette – it added something to it. There's this bit where someone knocks on the wall shouting, 'Keep that music down!'. That was dead muffled, and I was like, 'Has he been recording this with a mic and is that somebody next door banging on the wall?', but it's actually on the record. It's a great record, that. It's mad."

Glide's 'Assemblage 3&4' is out now on AV8. Will Sergeant's '"Toy Piano Mantra"' – a split seven-inch with Paul Simpson – is also out now on Feral Child

FLOWER POWER

Big horns for big horn

In the market for a new high-end speaker set-up? Looking as if some giant futuristic flowers had just sprouted in your front room, these FS-1 speakers from A For Ara have a sound that backs up their flamboyant design, coming loaded with a coaxial driver, which is "passively crossed" to a long-throw 13-inch woofer in a damped, sealed enclosure. Blimey. The US company also recommend you place each one six to 12-feet apart for optimal listening, so best start clearing out the garage. Get in touch with them for prices. **aforara.com**

IN THE MIXER

Bohemian FC become first ever "vinyl only" club

Time to wave your scarf, because the oldest football club in Dublin has become the world's first ever "vinyl only" football stadium, thanks to their new partnership with Irish online outlet, therecordhub.com. And who better equipped for the job than 100 per cent fan-owned Bohemian FC, who count Irvine Welsh and Samuel L Jackson as fans, and whose home ground Dalymount Park has previously hosted the likes of Thin Lizzy and Bob Marley. Aside from an agreement that only records can be played over the stadium PA, the club will also offer vinyl giveaways and host nights. **bohemianfc.com**

JUST GIVE ME THE NIGHT

Record shop offers itself up as a hotel

Promising the closest adult equivalent to being able to run riot after-hours in Hamleys, Hackney Wick-based record shop Vinyl Pimp has announced punters will be able to stay overnight and gain full access to their private vinyl stash, which contains just under 12,000 records. Staying in the guest room is free, but you have to spend over a certain amount in-store to qualify (£200 on a weekday, £250 at weekends). Claiming to be the first of its kind, Vinyl Pimp are currently in the process of setting up a website and booking system. In the meantime though, DM them on Instagram to sort out your perfect sleepover. **instagram.com/vinylpimp**

PULSE

IZANGOMA

Free-spirited electro/Afro-jazz ensemble

WHO?

IzangoMa is a new 15-strong collective based in Pretoria, which brings together musicians from South Africa and Mozambique. Led by guitarist/vocalist Sibusile Xaba and producer Ashley Kgabo, they partner traditional African instrumentation with all manner of machines, from a Roland TR-8 to an ARP Odyssey.

WHY IZANGOMA?

Xaba and Kgabo take their collective name from the word for a Zulu healer, and their music does indeed have a medicinal quality to it. Their debut album, 'Ngo Ma', blends aspects of jazz, electronica, "township jive" and the avant-garde – an effusive concoction that makes currently voguish Afrobeats look like bland, stodgy fare. The title track itself is a thing of wonder, juxtaposing fizzing synth lines with brass flourishes and gabbling half-spoken vocals (in both English and Zulu). IzangoMa make music which is genuinely unlike anything you've ever heard before.

TELL US MORE...

'Ngo Ma' (meaning "from mother") is a concept album exploring feminine energy – even if that wasn't its creators' original intention. "It developed as the music was leading us," explains Kgabo. "And funnily enough, every song is talking about mothers. This wasn't something that we planned." Their recent single, 'Out Of This World', is an ode to Mother Earth herself, while another album highlight is a tribute to a different sort of parental figure. "Yes you photo man / Yes you video man / We love you / We really, really do," sings Xaba on 'Johnny Dyani', a paean to the legendary SA bassist who formed the country's first racially mixed jazz band, The Blue Notes. IzangoMa are nothing if not imbued with the great man's boundary-breaking spirit.

WILL SIMPSON

'Ngo Ma' is out now on Brownswood

SCHOOL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Resident archivist **Jack Dangers** reaches for a rare seven-inch Fairlight demo disc from the dawn of the sampling era

This 1980 seven-inch, 'Fairlight Computer Musical Instrument', was produced to show off the first Fairlight synthesiser. They somehow managed to squeeze 20 minutes of music onto the disc, which includes sound effects, music, and a piece for a dance performance. According to the sleeve notes, one of the pieces, 'Timelapse' (the theme tune for an Australian sci-fi TV show, broadcast in March 1980 and set in the impossibly distant future of 1991), is the "very first practical use of the Fairlight". All of which makes this a significant artefact from the dawn of the age of sampling.

It's pretty rare too. The description on Discogs claims the record was only available if you bought a Fairlight, which would make it a very expensive way to get hold of a seven-inch. I'm sure they were produced to promote the machine, and were probably given out. Having said that, you can't find the audio on the internet anywhere, and I think only two have ever been sold on Discogs, one of which is the copy I bought in April 2023.

I've never used a Fairlight or even been in the same room as one. I had to wait until more reasonably priced technology became available, like everyone else. The financial pecking order of musicians in the 1980s was obvious through their use of samplers.

The first person in the UK to buy one was Peter Gabriel after which he set up a company called Syco Systems to import and distribute them in Europe. John Paul Jones of Led Zeppelin bought the second Fairlight in the UK, apparently to replace his Mellotron. Next was Richard Burgess of Landscape, who became a go-to guy for Fairlight programming, then Kate Bush, Trevor Horn, Thomas Dolby and Stewart Copeland. New Order waited for the more affordable Emulator.

I got my first sampler in 1986 – a Casio SK-1 with one-second sampling time and a microphone attached on a little lead. I was well aware of samplers before that, but at $70,000 it wasn't going to happen. By the end of the 1980s, Akai had pretty much killed off the Fairlight.

A quick look on eBay reveals that, as I type, a Fairlight IIx belonging to Blue Weaver – who played the instrument with Pet Shop Boys and Scritti Politti – is for sale. It comes with the original floppies with Pet Shop Boys sounds on them. Yours for just £40,000. The seven-inch cost around £80.

SUMMER TIME

Stellar doc gets up-close and personal with Donna

You can't write the history of electronic music without mentioning Donna Summer, whose work with Giorgio Moroder shook the very foundations of modern pop. Yet behind the timeless hits is another story that is more complicated than you'd probably first anticipate. 'Love To Love You' is a new documentary delving into the life of this music icon. Co-directed by Summer's daughter, Brooklyn Sudano, the story manages to capture her effervescent character as well as what it felt like to be behind the scenes.

"I have a secret life," admits Summer in the film. "But what you see is not what I am…" Out now on HBO, this is essential viewing. **hbo.com**

BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

One portable speaker to rule them all

Bang & Olufsen's new Beosound A5 portable speaker is pricking up ears, and for good reason. Featuring an outrageous amount of hi-tech gubbins – from 360-degree sound dispersion to Qi wireless charging – the A5 also gets in on the audio world's recent modular design craze. Each individual part of the A5 is replaceable, and regular software updates should sort you out for years to come. It makes this £899 portable speaker a must-have, and coming in a real oak and aluminium shell, it doesn't look too shabby either. Get your orders in now. **bang-olufsen.com**

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DISCOVERTHEBLUEDOT.COM

i · NewScientist · CLASH

As the boss of **Independent Project Records & Press**, Bruce Licher has released some brilliant albums and designed the sleeves of every single one of them, as well as producing countless postage stamps and the occasional flag

WORDS: PUSH

"I was trying to think of an interesting way to package my band's first album," begins Bruce Licher. "So I enrolled in a class in letterpress printing at the Women's Graphic Center in downtown LA, even though I had no idea what letterpress actually was.

"The first thing I had to print was a postcard, so I came up with something announcing the release of our record. They had this big flatbed press in the room, 18 by 24 inches, which I soon realised was the perfect size for an album cover, so I said to the teacher, 'If I take this class again, would you teach me to use that?'. She said, 'Yeah, sure'. I ended up printing 1,000 sleeves for my band on that press."

More than 40 years on and Bruce Licher's ongoing interest in letterpress printing, a form of relief printing which involves pressing paper or card onto inked raised blocks, has made him one of the most idiosyncratic designers in the music industry. He's one of the most celebrated too, with two Grammy nominations to his name, despite having mainly worked with underground artists. Most of his sleeves have been for Independent Project Records, the Los Angeles label he set up in 1980, and the relationship between IPR and his design and print company, Independent Project Press, remains close to this day.

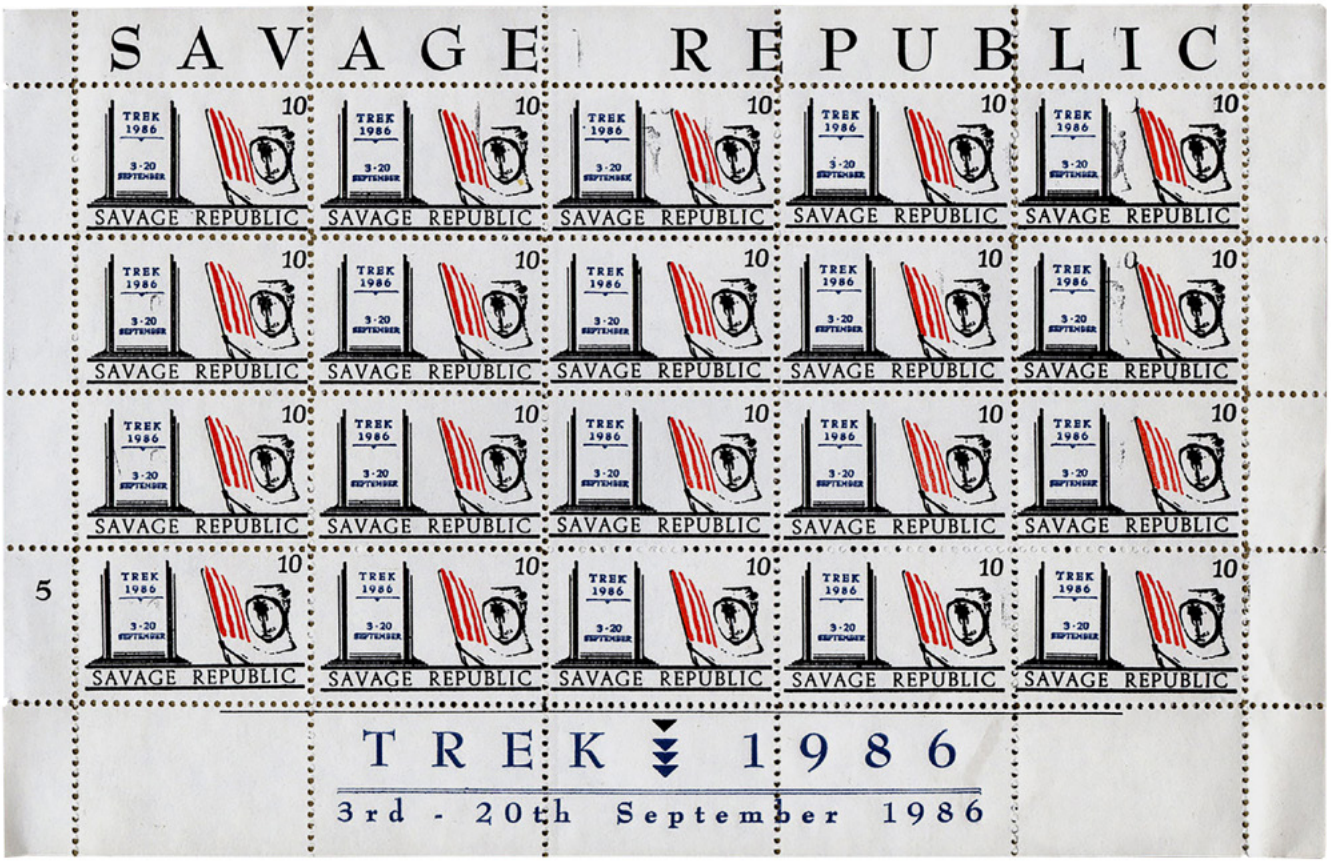
The cover Licher printed at the Women's Graphic Center was for the first edition of 'Tragic Figures', Savage Republic's 1982 debut album, a whorl of avant-garde post-punk, crackling with noise and propelled by tribal metal bashing. The fact that the inspiration for Licher initially picking up a musical instrument was 'No New York', Brian Eno's pioneering no wave compilation, says much about where Savage Republic were coming from.

As did the dramatic cover of 'Tragic Figures', which featured the title in Arabic above a graphic reworking of a news photo showing the execution of Kurdish rebels during the Iranian Revolution. It was printed on brown chipboard rather than card, giving it an incredibly organic feel. The initial run of 1,000 copies of the record sold out in three weeks, with four further editions following, each sleeve a variation of the original and each pressing accompanied by a fascinating range of printed ephemera.

"We changed our name to Savage Republic just as 'Tragic Figures' came out," says Licher. "And once we'd done that, I started thinking, 'OK, if we're supposed to be a republic, then we need a flag, we need postage stamps, we need all kinds of stuff…'"

Savage Republic's sound morphed over the next few years, incorporating elements of Mediterranean, Arabic and African music and introducing more melody to the maelstrom, but the flag Licher created for the band – red and white stripes with a palm tree emblem – was a constant presence, adorning innumerable postcards, flyers and posters, as well as vinyl, cassette and CD sleeves. It also featured on many of the sheets of commemorative stamps Licher produced every time the band put out an album or went on tour. While the stamps weren't valid for use, all the letters and packages sent from the Independent Project Records & Press offices were affixed with the correct Savage Republic postage alongside the correct US Mail postage.

"My mother got my brother and I started on collecting stamps when I was around eight years old," remembers Licher. "There's a lot of really beautiful artwork on stamps. I think growing up looking at all that imagery from around the world is why I've always been intrigued by faraway places."



Beyond his work with Savage Republic, who disbanded at the end of the 1980s, Licher has designed and printed material for a huge range of artists, from REM and Camper Van Beethoven to Stereolab, Harold Budd, Scritti Politti and Woo. Camper Van Beethoven released their debut album on IPR in 1985, while Stereolab recorded a one-off seven-inch for the label in 1999. The latter, a three-track EP called 'The In Sound', was available in five different letterpress-printed die-cut covers, including both brown and grey chipboard versions, plus a choice of black, clear, maroon, red and yellow vinyl. You can perhaps see why IPR are a highly collectable imprint.

"I'm a big fan of Stereolab," notes Licher. "I went to see them when they played in Arizona, where I was living for a while. Tim Gane was hanging out at the end of the night, signing records for people, so I walked up and said hello. When I told him I was from IPR, he said he loved the label, and we connected from there. I said it would be great to release a Stereolab seven-inch and it was amazing when we finally managed to do that, even though it took about two years to get it together.

"With Harold Budd, I met him through my Savage Republic co-founder Phil Drucker, who brought him down to my print room in LA. Harold said he liked what I was doing and asked me to design a few things. I ended up printing an announcement for him when his son was born, which was nice. Later on, he collaborated with Scenic, the band I put together in the 90s. He played piano on a track on our third album, 'The Acid Gospel Experience', an ambient space rock record we released in 2002."

Independent Project Records & Press continue to thrive, with Licher still at the heart of the intertwined operations. Three years ago, he assembled a selection of his finest design work for 'Savage Impressions', a hardback book published by P22, the renowned New York State type foundry, with a deluxe edition accompanied by a gold vinyl album called 'Tape Excavation'. Licher played on all 14 of the tracks on the record and all 22 tracks on an expanded version of 'Tape Excavation', which has recently been released on IPR as a standalone CD.

Whether as a designer, a printer or a musician, Bruce Licher's commitment to his various arts has never faltered and 'Savage Impressions' stands as a magnificent testimonial to the unique visual world he has created over the last four decades. It's striking to see just how many of his pieces have been printed on the chipboard that he used on his very first letterpress project way back in 1982.

"I was never especially interested in making prints to be framed and put on a wall," he says. "I wanted my art to be in people's hands. I loved the thought of somebody being at their record store, flipping through the racks, pulling something out and going, 'Wow, what is this? This is beautiful. I have to take this home with me'. So it was really the idea of people finding art where they didn't expect it. That's the reason I do what I do, even though it's not super-profitable, you know? And if I'd gone down the art gallery route, well, I don't know… I sometimes wonder if maybe this was a mistake, but there we are."

If it was a mistake, then it's one that record collectors across the globe will be delighted he made.

'Savage Impressions' is published by P22. The 'Tape Excavation' CD is out now on Independent Project Records

JUST LIKE HEAVEN

Nightclubs come and go, but what makes a space live on in popular consciousness? From The Haçienda to Fabric, '**Temporary Pleasure**' looks at the design of the places we lose ourselves in

WORDS: IMOGEN BEBB

The Electric Circus. Studio 54. Shoom. These are just some of the legendary nightclubs documented in 'Temporary Pleasure', a dazzling new hardback book examining the development of club architecture and culture from the 1960s to the present day.

The book's author is John Leo Gillen, a designer and producer who initially started documenting club spaces on Instagram in 2019. It's clear he lives, breathes and bleeds this stuff – quite literally, given that he was raised in the nightlife industry.

"As kids in the early 1990s, my sister and I often slept in the cloakroom of a nightclub, our family's business in the West of Ireland," says Gillen. "On weekend mornings we slid down mirrored stair railings and climbed dance podiums – the room thick with the hangover of a decade's worth of cigarette smoke, and the carpets sugar-soaked and crunching underfoot."

Vivid descriptions like these underpin 'Temporary Pleasure' and serve to unify the often drastically different personas of the many venues it documents. These range from the early avant-garde nightclubs of the 1960s, such as The Fun Palace in London and Maddox in Girona, to the more abstract post-club spaces of the 2000s, such as Amsterdam's Trouw, and Decoratelier in Brussels.

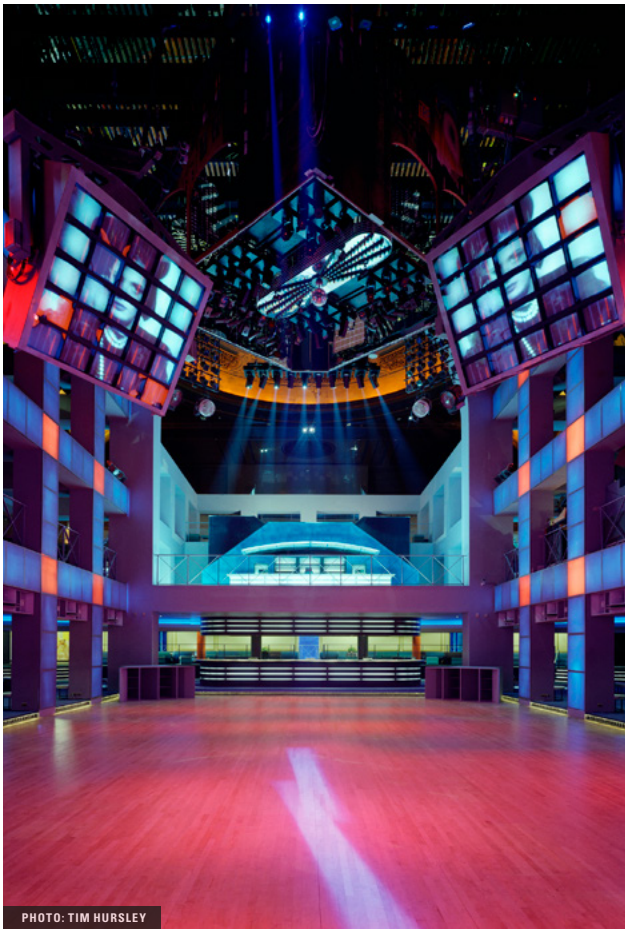


PHOTO: TIM HURSLEY

Informative mini essays also feature throughout, and Gillen's factual, no-nonsense approach to this side of 'Temporary Pleasure' is adroitly balanced with the more descriptive, illustrative stories of happenings in these chaotic institutions. He considers "the creative spirit" of club culture alongside the fact that, when it comes down to it, "all clubs are businesses to some degree".

Take the case of KU, a massive ,10,000-capacity club in Ibiza that opened in 1978 and closed in 1995. One minute Gillen talks of a club that "held huge themed parties where glamour, excess and hedonism were encouraged", and of its owner and founder José Antonio Santamaría, who was "credited with introducing some of the island's most iconic party concepts". Then the next, he is describing the collapse of the club's roof in 1990, Santamaría's subsequent bankruptcy, and his later assassination.

Such brutal contrasts, it seems, hold the message at the heart of this book, which is that "the role of the nightclub is to embody and challenge the here and now – a place, a scene, a moment – and then to die and make way for the next".

The choice of images is intriguing. Gillen opts against pictures of the clubs at peak hours, rammed with people, in favour of those showing them out of hours, bereft of clientele. It serves as a poignant reminder that it is the clientele, those seeking "temporary pleasure" – from the gay men who frequented The Saint in New York, to the non-conformists who partied at Fabric in London – who form the foundations upon which truly great clubs are built.

Gillen's own yearning for places purpose-built with "shared physical experiences and communal transcendence" is writ large. But this is not a sad book about lost memories. Most of all, 'Temporary Pleasure' is a reminder that while the gratification felt by those who designed, built and frequented such clubs may have been temporary, their stories and the cultural reverberations brought about by what they created will continue to live on.

'Temporary Pleasure: Nightclub Architecture, Design And Culture From The 1960s To Today' is out now, published by Prestel

BANGING ON

Fat Roland is musing in a slimmed-down way. On his mind this month (as far as we can tell): **New Formats**

You can trust Electronic Sound. It's reliable, like SI units, our planet's gravity, or Push our editor's ability to nail a backflip even when shashed on Jaffa Cakes. Record company fat cats don't have their cream-sodden pawprints on these pages. No, not here. If the pages do feel damp, that's for an entirely different reason and I'd rather not talk about it, thank you very much.

OK, granted, there's the subliminal advertising. We now admit that the 16-page feature about the Guggenheim diorama of Aphex Twin Y-fronts was secretly a commercial for drain cleaner. Yes, the text in this month's cover feature is indeed a covert acronym plugging shoe horns designed by Lorraine Kelly. And last month's write-up about the techno clog dance-off was really a plug for a slightly bigger and more commercial techno clog dance-off. Hey – gotta pay the bills…

Same reliable Electronic Sound – but a new format for this column. Banging On has transformed into something more compact, like a horse becoming a pony, a sycamore becoming a bonsai, or our once great nation becoming a post-Brexit hellscape of cheap plastic bunting and stale sausage rolls. Fear not, sweet reader. Good things come in small packages. Just ask Kylie Minogue, or my cardboard cut-out of Kylie Minogue which is three inches shorter than the real Kylie Minogue. Rest assured, I will continue to brandish my trademark wit, about which Creative Whelk Monthly once remarked, "Is he still writing that? I thought he was dead".

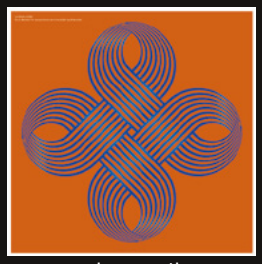
Format changes are not new. Do you remember DAT tapes, or to give them their full name, Doomed Alternative To tapes? Or how about the Sony MiniDisc, which was a smaller version of a better thing, like three-pack Oreos, the Winter Olympics or S Club Juniors. And records used to be 78s, not just 45s and whatever the other number is, and 78 made sense because it was the average age of the people who owned them. See? I've thoroughly convinced you that the format change is good, and you are enthusiastically nodding like a Churchill dog having a colonoscopy on a rollercoaster.

In fact, this is the best format change since MP3s. Modern streaming may have all the audio quality of a ZX Spectrum loading screen played from the bottom of a well, but at least without the clutter of vinyl, I have shelf space for my techno clog dance-off trophies. Seriously, it's given me a whole new lease of life. My feet look so sexy in them.

Aren't clogs great? Clogs. Lovely clogs. Clogs, clogs, clogs. You really should buy some Fat Roland clogs. Now available from Primark in Daft Punk orange and Skrillex mauve. Push, if you could pop a subliminal link here, that would be great.

Nailed it.

Recent album releases from
Expert Sleepers



andrew ostler
four drones for saxophone
and modular synthesizer

john reidar holmes
at the turning of the day...

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NATURAL SELECTION

The field recordist's new do-it-all gizmo

With a lot of duff microphones swamping the market, it's easy to get lost in the debris. But Teenage Engineering's latest CM-15 offers substance and style in one neat little portable package, touting features you don't often find in mobile mics, such as its one-inch large-diaphragm capsule. And while the CM-15's £1,049 price tag doesn't make it the budget choice, the fact you can hook up with the OP-1 Field and TX-6 Field Mixer makes it a terrific microphone when you're on the go. **teenage.engineering**

YOU OLD ROMANTIC, YOU

Photo book pays tribute to the new romantic scene

Imagine you're a photographer in 1977, and your first photo assignment is to shoot the Sex Pistols' 'Pretty Vacant'. That was the case for Virginia Turbett, who spent the next 10 years snapping the musicians and tribes of the day for mags like Sounds, Smash Hits, The Face and ID. Having amassed quite the archive, Café Royal Books are now releasing Turbett's collection of new romantic stills, featuring all manner of hairsprayed bangs and paisley cravats. You can pick up a copy of the 36-page pamphlet directly from Turbett (email virginia@virginiaturbett.com), or from Café Royal Books, for £6.70. **caferoyalbooks.com**

WISH GRANT'ED

Creep Show man speaks on his love for language

John Grant can speak German, Spanish, Russian, Icelandic, some French, and he's apparently making great progress in Swedish. And believe it or not, he still remembers a bit of English, as demonstrated in 'On Language', a long-form interview with writer Will Burns that explores the Michigan-born musician's love for words in whatever country he finds himself. The short book rattles through Grant's views on politics and history, as well as "heartbreaking digressions" into his own personal life. No 51 in the Rough Trade Editions series, get your copy now for £7.99. **roughtradebooks.com**

PULSE

GRANDAD

Enigmatic electronica powerhouse lets fly

WHO?

Good question. This GRANDAD is a truly mysterious entity, real name, at present, unknown. What we do know is that they create marvellously haywire electronica, permeated by trippy vocal samples and pseudo-percussive synthetic textures. Though relatively nascent as a standalone project, GRANDAD's list of purported prior collaborators is formidable, dropping names as far and wide as Loraine James, Anna Meredith, Actress, Hannah Peel, William Basinski, Oliver Coates, Rival Consoles and even the London Contemporary Orchestra. In the musician's own words, "Joyous musical adventures, of course, yet bubbling under the surface has always been GRANDAD's real love: writing electronic music". All is well and good so far.

WHY GRANDAD?

The debut self-titled GRANDAD EP is a trip. Lurching from one phenomenally detailed soundscape to the next, it collages humour into deadly serious compositions with aplomb. We'd be complaining about the whiplash if it wasn't so darn good, resting somewhere between Anna Meredith's 'Bumps Per Minute' album and Aphex Twin at his most outre. If these first offerings are anything to go by, then you'd do well to keep an ear on what GRANDAD gets up to this year.

TELL US MORE...

And if you need yet more convincing, the EP's physical iteration is packaged in a fully biodegradable case, grown – I'm not joking – out of mycelium. The literal fruits of a special collaboration between GRANDAD and The Magical Mushroom Company, whose mission is to replace plastic packaging with "the magic of mushrooms". The packaging is supposedly the first CD case of its kind, but collectors be warned – it's set to completely biodegrade after around 30 years. If you're still curious, you can order one to see for yourself.

WILLIAM STOKES

The 'GRANDAD' EP is out now via Bandcamp

SOUND OF THE YEAR 2022

The Sound Of The Year Awards seek to identify the most profound recordings of the past 12 months – whether profoundly heartwarming, profoundly heartbreaking or profoundly bananas

After five months of deliberation, a star-studded panel of musicians, field recordists and engineers has settled on this year's nine winning entries, which detail everything from the dawn of a war to an earthquake in a music shop. That's right, it's been another uneventful term here on planet Earth…

SOUND OF THE YEAR

A sound that captures 2022

Anton Stuk (Ukraine)

'February 26 12.07 AM Chernihiv'

"I made this recording on the third day of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Chernihiv, at the home of my mother," says Ukrainian composer Anton Stuk. "Setup for recording was simple – just a mobile phone. She was going to the shelter at the time to meet some people nearby, and during that recording the artillery fire starts. On this day the siege of Chernihiv started – that was the first shelling at such close range. Unfortunately this war still continues, so now in many places there are people who could record such a sound."

BEST NATURAL SOUND

A sound that occurs without human input

Jocelyn Robert (France)

'Crépuscule Automnal À L'Étang Du Ravoir (Autumn Nightfall At Ravoir's Pond)'

"In the heart of the Orléans forest, nestled deep within the Gâtinais region, lies a hidden gem – L'Étang Du Ravoir," says sound engineer and field recordist Jocelyn Robert. "Protected by towering pine and oak trees, this tranquil pond serves as a sanctuary for birds and mammals. As the sun set on a late September evening, I found myself perched inside a wood cabin, waiting for twilight. Here, in this moment of transition between day and night, a baroque ballet unfolds before my very eyes – a passing of the torch from diurnal to nocturnal creatures."

GARDIKA GIGIH PRADIPTA

YOICHI KAMIMURA

DISAPPEARING SOUND

A sound unlikely to be heard in the future, but that is worth saving

Yoichi Kamimura (Japan)

'Ryuhyo'

"Ryuhyo in Shiretoko is located in the northernmost area of Japan," says field recordist Yoichi Kamimura. "It's a wonderland that arrives every winter on the ocean currents from Russia. This beautiful ice carries plankton from the sea, bringing a rich ecosystem to Shiretoko's oceans. The unique sound phenomenon "Ryuhyo-Nari", which used to be heard from beneath the ice like human breath, can now no longer be heard due to the decrease in the amount of drift ice caused by global warming."

COMPOSED WITH SOUND

A composition made predominantly using recorded sound rather than musical or electronic instruments

Gardika Gigih Pradipta (Indonesia)

'Mimpi Owa (A Duet With Javanese Gibbons)'

"In August last year, friends and I from Tanijiwo and Musik Sekitar visited the SwaraOwa researcher community in the forests of Petungkriyono," says composer and soundscape researcher Gardika Gigih Pradipta. "We were lucky to meet a group of Javanese gibbons calling to each other. I recorded these magical sounds with a handy recorder. Later, I composed this music, elaborated the soundscape recording of Javanese gibbons, eagles, cicadas and other forest sounds with a Sundanese zither and m'basing m'basing, a traditional reed instrument from Sulawesi."

CLIP – SOUND AND MUSIC

MOST UNPLEASANT SOUND

A sound that has caused significant distress

Mélia Roger (France)

'Calf Trying To Breathe After Dehorning'

"I recorded this sound in an industrial milk farm in France," says sound artist Mélia Roger. "Around 20 calves are trapped, put under sedative and dehorned directly after. We are listening to one of them, after the process, having trouble breathing and calling the others. You hear the stillness, how peaceful and quiet the rest of the place is, with the distant birds and chatting. But still, this calf is suffering, and no one hears it. Violence can be so silent."

BEST IMAGINED SOUND

Describe a compelling sound that doesn't yet exist

CLIP – Sound And Music (UK)

'Imaginary Sounds'

This submission was part of an ideas-based sound workshop run by CLIP, an educational music organisation for young people aged 12-14. Here are some of their ideas for sounds that don't exist yet:

The sound of water evaporating; Tamagotchi synthesis; earthquake in a music shop; sound in a dream; pig/cow snoring; monkey/gorilla screaming; a dead person; steel falling out of the sky in the sea in the middle of nowhere; moving your head on a pillow; being inside a molecule; dragon breathing, alien or kraken; the world's largest metal being placed on a feather; forever reverberant metal; static in your ear; infinite reverb; atom, dust, nothing; sound of life.

BEST INNOVATION IN SOUND TECHNOLOGY

An award for a tool or piece of technology that has made working with sound result in a greater experience

Nicolas Rochette & Audiotopie (Canada)

'Sédiment Narratif'

"'Sédiment Narratif' invites visitors in public spaces to experience speech and sound through the vibration of the ground," says Nicolas Rochette of Audiotopie. "An underground audio diffusion system allows people to lie down directly on the ground and hear and feel the vibrations of sounds and voices. 'Sédiment Narratif' is a furtive, invisible, but audible project. It is at the confluence of storytelling, installation art and sound art."

BEST SOUND INNOVATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A new technology, appliance or technique that has improved how the sound of something is experienced in everyday life

Vaillant (Germany)

aroTHERM plus

"The demand for noise reduction solutions has increased in the last year, and high levels of noise affect everyone a little differently," say heating systems manufacturer Vaillant. "Continual noise may disturb sleep patterns, which could lead to health problems. This is especially serious for children, as it may impair development. Our award-winning aroTHERM plus heat pump ensures the unit produces the lowest possible sound levels.

To hear each winning entry, go to soundoftheyearawards.com

Producer **Richard X** talks about his Girls On Top single 'Being Scrubbed', the pioneering 2001 mash-up of early Human League and TLC tracks

INTERVIEW: MAT SMITH

"I'd been working in studios as an engineer for a few years by 2001. I picked things up quickly from being around artists, and that gave me a skill set which I used on my own music.

"I went to loads of Rough Trade nights in West London, and I was DJing a bit for them. There was a lot of electronic music coming through the shop, released on seven-inch singles, and when the idea for the Girls On Top bootlegs came to me, it was almost a reaction against all of that. It was inspired by the new things I was hearing, which I felt had more of a link to the electronic stuff I grew up listening to.

"'Being Scrubbed' and the B-side, 'I Wanna Dance With Numbers' were made in a single weekend, because that's all the time I had between jobs in the studio. Both tracks reflected the music I'd been listening to in the late 1990s. Exciting things were happening in the charts then, like TLC's 'No Scrubs', which had a specific type of production by She'kspere. It was super-programmed but had a super-interesting funky sound, and it reminded me of the records I liked, especially early Human League and drum machine-based synthpop.

"These two things fitted together in my mind, so I took 'No Scrubs' and put that on top of the original mono version of 'Being Boiled' by The Human League, which is really dry and DIY. You had the minimalism of 'Being Boiled' mixed with those two-step, programmed drums. I don't remember experimenting with lots of different ideas to see what went together, it was just, 'Oh, that's the idea for that'.

"I'd used Akai samplers before. With a sampler, you could set up a drum loop and speed it up or slow it down, but when you did that things got pitched, so there wasn't a lot of musicality about it. A new program called Sony Acid had been released around then. With that, you could sample longer sections than with an Akai, and it allowed you to alter the pitch in semitones. That meant things stayed in the key they were in when you sped them up, and got around the issue that people mixing on decks would always have.

"I used the original TLC vocal from 'No Scrubs', but it sounds a little bit different because of that pitching. The other cool thing was that you got some artefacts when you sampled, like digital noise, which actually became part of what I liked about doing these tracks. To me, that was the sound of numbers crunching. It had this lo-fi quality, but not in an analogue way – more an early digital media way. I've seen plugins that try to recreate that now, for when someone wants to replicate the sound of a RealMedia audio file.

"For 'I Wanna Dance With Numbers', I bought a second-hand 12-inch of Whitney Houston's 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody' in Kingston around 1993, from one of those cheap boxes in a record shop. It had an a cappella version on it. I had a Technics SL-1210 setup, and I always annoyed people by trying

to mix Whitney Houston's voice over random tracks. I put the Whitney vocal together with 'Numbers' by Kraftwerk, which had been a breakdancer's tune, so various people had looped it and done stuff with it over the years. I basically rearranged it back as a song, almost like a 12-inch version.

"'Being Scrubbed' and 'I Wanna Dance With Numbers' were very much in the spirit of the times. Different things were constantly being combined together in the early 2000s – that had become part of the culture. It was magpie, pick-and-mix, cut and paste – those sorts of techniques were all suddenly relevant again. The bootleg movement was quite an arty thing to start with. Humour was part of it too. There was also the cheekiness of actually putting out a single like 'Being Scrubbed'. It's funny to think now that majors would be bothered about someone selling 300 seven-inch singles, but people were mad. I was getting letters, and I kept my head down for a long time because of that.

"The act of releasing it felt even more dangerous. Punk sensibilities were very relevant to it – the seven-inch format was interesting because that's what popularised punk, and that really appealed to me. It sold out really quickly, thanks to some support from Rough Trade and others.

"I didn't expect to get signed to a major label when I was doing bootlegs like 'Being Scrubbed' – I had just wanted to release a record. But when you started hearing bootlegs in London bars and parties, that's when record companies took note. Virgin signed me. They thought they could clear the Kraftwerk and Whitney Houston samples because they had a good relationship with Kraftwerk – who, fantastically, thought it was the worst record they'd ever heard, but in the best sleeve.

"Virgin were keen for me to work with commercial bands, and that's what I did on my album 'Richard X Presents His X-Factor Vol 1'. One of the tracks on it was 'Being Nobody', which again used 'Being Boiled', but this time Liberty X sang the lyrics from Rufus And Chaka Khan's 'Ain't Nobody' over the top. That version of 'Being Boiled' wasn't sampled – I had to recreate the song, and ended up buying one of the original Korg synthesisers that The Human League had used, in order to get the right sounds. That was a fortuitous use of record company money.

"I separately produced 'Freak Like Me' by the Sugababes, which used the lyrics from Adina Howard's song with the music from Tubeway Army's 'Are "Friends" Electric?'. That blew up. All of a sudden, there was only one way to go forward, which was to embrace the poppiness and commerciality of what I was doing. You can't really go back to pressing 300 singles after that. Even so, as I look back, it's 'Being Scrubbed' that's responsible for most of the change in my life. It's definitely been a quite interesting blessing."

For more, visit blackmelody.com

AM BOYS

Scintillating analogue synth excursions

WHO?

Based in New York, AM Boys are John Blonde and Chris Moore. The former was a member of American electropop outfit House Of Blondes, while producer/engineer Moore has recorded under various solo guises, most recently as Light Vortex. After meeting at an Aphex Twin listening party, the pair bonded immediately. "We had instant chemistry and very quickly began writing and recording together," says Blonde. "The first thing we wrote was 'AM Theme', and our excitement after that electric moment led to everything else. It felt right to name ourselves after our first song."

WHY AM BOYS?

Rooted in sparse but hugely atmospheric electronics, their debut album, 2022's 'Distance Decay', is exquisitely crafted. Recorded at Blonde and Moore's Glowmatic Sound studio in Brooklyn, it combines "analogue synths, drum machines, space echo and voice" to shimmeringly radiant effect, with more than a nod to 'Autobahn'-era Kraftwerk (check out the propulsive 'Last Night') and early Human League. "We just work off each others' energy and improvise to create songs that appeal to both of us," explains Blonde. "To us, synths and electronic music are still futuristic."

TELL US MORE...

Building on their "ecstatic minimalism" approach, AM Boys hope to release their second album, 'Present Phase', later this year. In the meantime, they continue to play regular live shows in NYC. "We made a video for 'Traveler' from 'Distance Decay' last year that we described as being 'what the electricity looks like inside our synths'," says Blonde. "We want to extend that vibe by incorporating a visual component to our live performances. We're also exploring starting a new monthly series where we'd invite electronic artists to play live and have DJs spin similar music. We want to connect and hear the music everyone is making and listening to in person." Ones to watch, for sure.

VELIMIR ILIC

'Distance Decay' is out now on Glowmatic

FLYING THE NEST

A one-off collaboration between **Sharron Kraus** and the late **David Muddyman** of Loop Guru, 'Birdloom' has finally seen the light of day, two decades after the recording of this pioneering folktronica project

WORDS: CARL GRIFFIN

In her typically unassuming manner, British-American experimental folk artist Sharron Kraus contacted me recently about a groundbreaking, and hitherto lost, album she thought people might want to hear about.

Kraus made the album over 20 years ago with David Muddyman, who was best-known as one half of worldbeat electronicists Loop Guru, as well as his more recent ambient guise Echoflex, but who sadly passed away last year. Their collaboration came about in April 2002 after Muddyman posted an ad to an email list Kraus was subscribed to which went as follows:

"Female singer, in the vain [sic] of Sandy Denny, Celia Humphries, or even Yma Sumac, wanted to pull English traditional folk music into the 21st century. If you think a backing of Mongolian drones, screaming 60s organs and transcengenic rhythms sounds appalling, please don't reply. What I want is a singer with heart and passion and a sense of adventure…"

Thankfully, Kraus was not remotely appalled and quickly responded. As well as expressing an interest in traditional and experimental music, Muddyman forewarned her that he didn't consider himself to be a "real" musician, telling her:

"My instruments are my computer, my samplers and lots of pieces of tape… I love working with real singers and musicians because they give needed life and vitality, sometimes difficult to create entirely on a computer."

At that point in time, Kraus was a more conventional, though largely self-taught, musician and had just released her first album, 'Beautiful Twisted', a collection of songs written on guitar and banjo that took melodic cues from traditional songs and tunes. In her potential partnering with Muddyman lay a theoretical melding of the traditional and the modern, two musical disciplines brought together, which up to that point had barely been willing to acknowledge each other's presence.

"Setting folk songs to electronic sounds before folktronica became a thing," as Kraus put it. "We emailed ideas back and forth, thinking about songs to record. We were both big fans of Shirley Collins and Martin Carthy, so mostly drew on their repertoires. One exception was the child ballad, 'Brown Robin', with its story of love, deception and cross-dressing involving a king's daughter and her lover, which we were keen to include. We could find neither a recorded version of that song nor a tune associated with the words, so I wrote a tune for it and we recorded it."

The recording process involved Muddyman building up layers of sound that Kraus would then sing over, adding the occasional analogue instrument. He sent CDs of his work-in-progress with notes expressing anxieties about his unorthodox experiments.

"'Polly On The Shore' hasn't turned out how I was possibly expecting it to," he wrote. "It now has more in common with Tom Waits around the time of 'Swordfishtrombones'. I have also started a third, 'Sir Patrick Spens', which is sounding like a folk band given to a Jamaican dubmaster who made a record and then played it underwater."

So far so good, then. Kraus' own written replies called Muddyman's vivid descriptions and raised them by two.

"Some of the work in progress is great on first listening – 'The Bloody Gardener' is definitely getting creepier – gorgeous," she wrote. "I love the rhythmic sounds that come in on the second verse. They sound like either plants being ripped out of marshy ground or roots sucking up nutrients, or something. It really gives the impression that it's not just the gardener that's evil but that the whole garden is!"

The pair fed off each other's excitement about the way the songs were developing and hoped other people would be similarly enthusiastic about the project, which had been named 'Birdloom'.

They ran the project by Ian Anderson, then editor of international and folk music magazine fRoots, who invited them to be interviewed for 'A Place Called England' on BBC Radio 3 to discuss the future of English folk music.

Two 'Birdloom' tracks were featured, but that was the only time any of the recordings saw the light of day. When the radio show was broadcast, Kraus and Muddyman described the idea being "to mix ancient with even more ancient and tradition with modern, to take traditional English folk songs and enhance their stories with cinematic tendencies, to breathe rhythmic life into the cobwebs and create a new 21st century folk music".

They had high hopes, justifiably. It's an astonishing album which only in odd moments feels a little dated – and then only in hindsight because at the time, we'd never heard anything like it. Much of it sounds as though it could've been recorded last week. Kaleidoscopic and at times thrillingly singular, tracks like the drone-led 'Nellie The Milkmaid' or 'The Bloody Gardener' do more than simply drag an ancient form into the 21st century. They render it anew with a fresh vitality that had no precedent.

Demos were sent out to established labels, specialising in either folk or electronica, but none was brave enough to release it (we won't embarrass any by naming them, but you'd be surprised). So the album got shelved. Kraus moved to Philadelphia, Muddyman to Cornwall, and they only kept in touch sporadically. Time moved on. Three years later, she received an email from him, with their album clearly still firmly on his mind.

"I still listen to the 'Birdloom' music," he wrote. "It doesn't date. I would like to see it released sometime. I think it is worthy of that."

In the wake of Muddyman's untimely death in March last year, Kraus revisited 'Birdloom' and felt a huge sadness. Shortly after, she was contacted by a song collector, Karl Sinfield, who was interested in hearing their version of 'Brown Robin' as research for a forthcoming book. It galvanised Kraus to consider a release. And so, should you be interested, it's out in the wild at last, released via Bandcamp to quiet word-of-mouth acclaim.

"I don't really have any feelings about the rejections at this point – it's so long ago," says Kraus. "I was disappointed at the time, and I think Dave was even more so, as he was convinced we were on to something. It's sad that he's not here to share this little 'Birdloom' moment."

But regret is not the overwhelming emotion. Writing on her Bandcamp page, Kraus concluded her reflections on the album with a note of celebration.

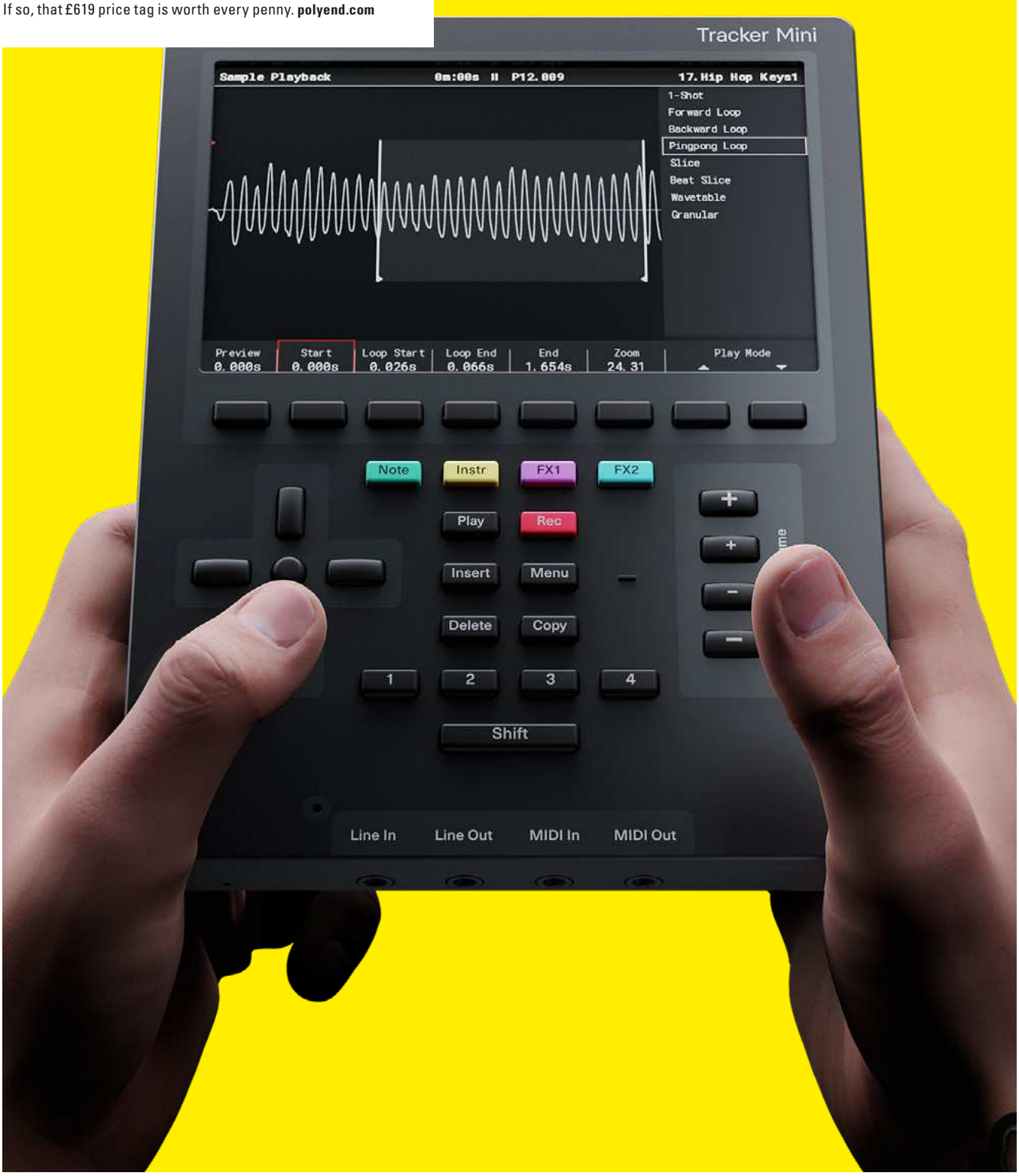
"Now, after even longer, and a year after Dave's death, I'm listening to the tracks we recorded and am flooded with good memories of a dear friend, a lively collaboration, and a time and place in our lives."

'Birdloom' is out now via Bandcamp

RIGHT ON TRACK

Bitesize music production tool wows

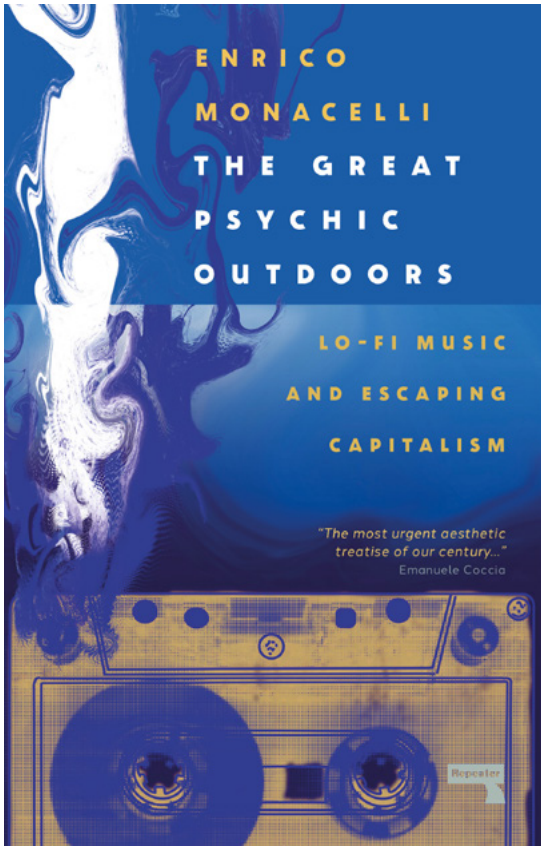
Polish company Polyend have launched the Tracker Mini, a diminutive, fully portable successor to their popular Tracker workstation. With its large colour screen, eight tracks for sequencing stereo audio and MIDI, audio-over-USB functionality, a built-in microphone, and an array of sampling and sound design tools, it will help you make an album on the go. If so, that £619 price tag is worth every penny. **polyend.com**



LO & BEHOLD

Book looks at all things lo-fi

As the world becomes increasingly awash with hi-fidelity accessories and technological developments, it's easy to forget that sometimes the best tech isn't the be-all and end-all. Published by Repeater Books, 'The Great Psychic Outdoors' by Enrico Monacelli is the first book to dive into lo-fidelity music, digging out the pioneers of this hard-to-categorise genre, and engaging with it "on its own terms, facing head-on the contradictions and possibilities of this multifaceted phenomenon". An indispensable addition to the canon of electronic music, look out for it this month, when it goes on sale for just £10.99. **repeaterbooks.com**



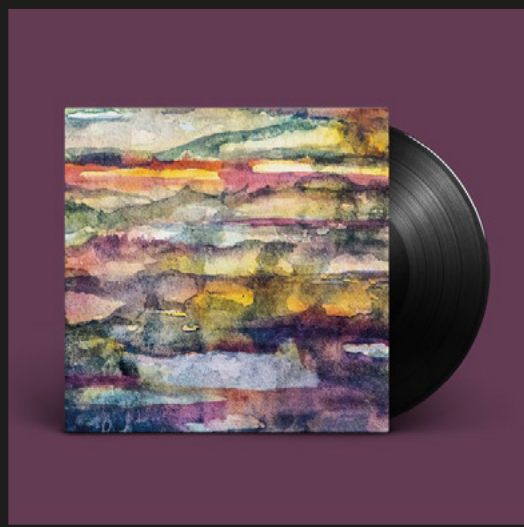
SPINE-TINGLING

Organising your records, made simple

We know the Venn diagram of Electronic Sound readers and Discogs collectors is almost a full circle – don't pretend otherwise. So here, dear reader, is the perfect app for you. Developed by Gadhouse, the Thailand-based lifestyle and audio brand, GadGo is a tool for digitally cataloguing your vinyl. It works by scanning the sleeve barcode on the record, and is ideal for anyone who finally needs to sort through their collection. Gadhouse also promise that in the near future you'll be able to purchase LPs in-app from Discogs with just a tap. And if you haven't heard of Gadhouse, you soon will. The brand, which is very popular in Asia, is set to release a number of products in the UK this year. **gadhouse.com**

SIX BY SEVEN: Then Now And Neil
A sublime double vinyl album paying homage to
Mark Hollis and Talk Talk's epic Laughing Stock Album.
sixbyseven.bandcamp.com

ELEMENTAL



Robert Fripp Exposure

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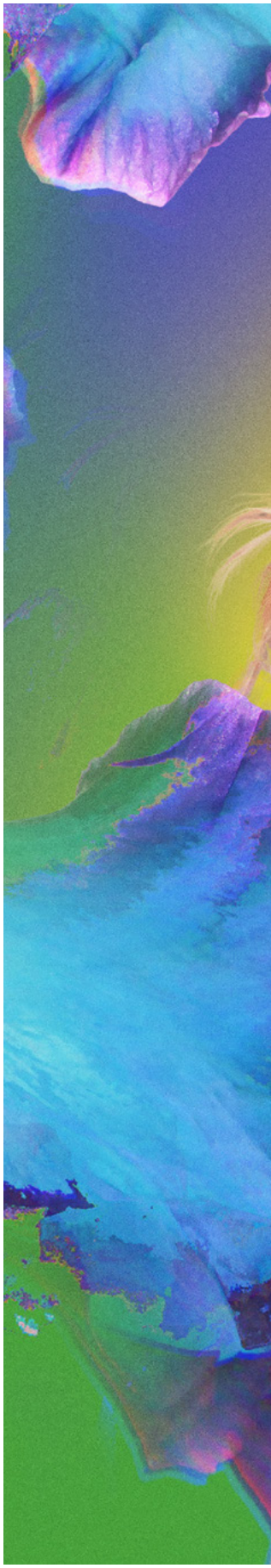

A majestic collection of 21st century synthpop – complete with hints of disco, a sprinkling of acid house and a big dollop of glamour – 'The Love Invention' is the long-awaited debut solo album from Alison Goldfrapp. Backed by some fabulously playful AI-generated visuals, it's no surprise that the record rocketed straight into the UK Top 10 in the week of its release...

WORDS: DAVE SIMPSON

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early a quarter of a century after they were nominated for the Mercury Music Prize for 'Felt Mountain', their genre-fluid debut album that mixed electronica, Weimar cabaret and acoustic folk, Goldfrapp are all over modern pop. You can hear their trademark synthpop-meets-glam rock sound, first introduced on 'Black Cherry', the 2003 follow-up to 'Felt Mountain', in the music of Madonna and Kylie Minogue, Katy Perry and Kanye West, Let's Eat Grandma and La Roux, and even further left field, right the way through to Fat White Family and Warmduscher.

Alison Goldfrapp and her musical partner Will Gregory were not the first to blend the influences of the likes of Kraftwerk and T. Rex into a glittering sonic stomp – those that got there ahead of them range from the Gary Glitter-covering Human League to the Roxy Music-influenced World Of Twist – but they took it mainstream. The duo had already scored four UK Top 40 hits from 'Black Cherry' before 'Ooh La La' and 'Number 1', two tracks from 2005's million-selling 'Supernature', camped in the Top 10, with an Ivor Novello songwriting award for 'Strict Machine' plus BRIT and Grammy nominations along the way. 'Ooh La La', incidentally, has now notched up an incredible 47 million streams.

"I remember being at an awards ceremony once where they had very specific categories," says Alison. "You know, dance music, rock music, and so on. I hated those rigid categories. But everybody would ask, 'What are Goldfrapp? Are they dance? Are they electronic?'. We'd always been a hybrid."

But the distinctive pairing of Alison and Will is currently on hold. Now some three decades into her career, the singer has become a solo artist – an unexpected move she describes as "stepping out of my little box" – although she is adamant this doesn't necessarily mean the group that bears her surname will never make another record again.

"I've worked with Will for over 20 years and we've released seven albums, so I'd say we've had a pretty good stint together," she explains. "Will has always had other projects in between, going off and doing his thing, and I've wanted to do my thing for a long time. Everything's great, it's all good between us – we had a catch-up only yesterday – but neither of us has plans to make any new music together. We'd never say never, but he's doing his thing and I'm focusing on this…"

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lison Goldfrapp plays with her hair as she talks. We're chatting on Zoom and she's sitting in a featureless, unidentifiable room somewhere in east London, positioned a little way back from the camera. I'm not sure if that's deliberate or not, but it gives her a slightly distant and elusive presence, which is something that has always been part of the Goldfrapp aesthetic.

Having signed a deal with Skint Records, she's been quietly releasing solo tracks into the ether for the past few months. First there was 'So Hard So Hot', an electro banger with shades of acid house that she recorded during the 2022 heatwave.

Alison says the lyrics of 'So Hard So Hot' are "a comment on the climate, but it has a sexual connotation too". The song is accompanied by a surrealist, AI-assisted video directed by Mat Maitland, who has worked with her going right back to 2003, and she describes the visuals as "seeking to reflect a mythical world that is simultaneously powerful and fragile".

Mat also directed the video for a second single, 'NeverStop', which followed shortly after. Alison's inspiration for the track came from "feeling the wonder of nature" during lockdown.

"It's about committing to connect with one another, as well as with nature and our surroundings, while trying to navigate through the contradictions and complexities of life," she notes.

And now there's her first solo album, 'The Love Invention', which again showcases Alison's chameleonic persona and her musical evolution. The electro-glam of 'Black Cherry' and 'Supernature' is still in there somewhere, but this is a much more dancefloor-friendly record – slinky, gossamer synthpop influenced by house and especially disco.

"I'm a creative person, so I always like to be doing something or making something," she smiles. "As an artist, I think that it's important to feel excited about what you're doing… and I'm *incredibly* excited about what I'm doing."

This, it turns out, wasn't always the case. Back in 2019, two years after the last Goldfrapp album, 'Silver Eye', she says she'd "fallen out of love" with making music and needed some sort of reset – both professionally and personally.

"I've got a low boredom threshold," she explains. "So I took some time out, focusing on drawing and taking photographs, and I had a sort of rethink about my life. But then the pandemic happened, the lockdown happened, and I thought, 'Oh my god'."

During this period, Alison realised she wanted to work with other artists, so she started reaching out by email. Some of the people she wrote to didn't even bother to reply.

"Which was quite interesting," she says. "It was certainly a learning curve. I suppose that's the modern thing, to not reply to people."

But Norwegian duo Röyksopp – Goldfrapp peers of sorts and a group that she's admired for years – did write back. And the Scandinavians were as intrigued by the thought of collaborating as she was.

"At first, I was thinking, 'I'll pop across to Norway and make a little holiday of it'," she chuckles. "I had this whole fantasy of me hanging out in the studio with them. But lockdown meant I couldn't go there, of course."

Once it became clear that the project was going to have to be completed remotely, she set up a small studio in her home.

"I kept wondering, 'Can I do this?'," she says. "I mean, Will and I never did anything unless we were in the same room."

And yet suddenly, Alison was the only person in the room.

"To begin with, it was quite daunting," she acknowledges. "It was completely new territory for me and it felt really odd. But Röyksopp sent me over a few ideas, a few sketches, and there were a couple that I found quite interesting. I could hear myself doing something with them. After a while it became, 'This is actually quite good', and I started thinking about what I could do and what I wanted to do. It just grew from there."

In the end, the alliance birthed two tracks, 'Impossible' and 'The Night', both of which appeared on Röyksopp's acclaimed 2022 album trilogy 'Profound Mysteries'. They were also both issued as singles. 'Impossible', appropriately enough, is a song about dislocation.

The experience convinced Alison she could step outside the band that had been her creative environment and, to an extent, her comfort zone for so long. She'd worked with other musicians earlier in her career – not least Orbital and Tricky – but always as a guest vocalist, not a prime collaborative artist.

"There's a synchronicity in working closely with people that brings out something different in you," she declares. "It gave me a new headspace, a confidence I'd never had before."

This oozes from 'The Love Invention'. The album is the work of an artist trying on new musical clothes and finding they fit perfectly. She'd initially intended to do an EP and had delivered five tracks to Skint.

"The record company said to me, 'These are great. Can we have an album?'. I assumed they meant next year or something like that, but they wanted it much sooner. Sooner than I felt was humanly possible."

To her surprise, Alison found that she responded well to the pressure of working to a short deadline, partly helped by what she calls the "good people around me". She's speaking about James Greenwood and Richard X, her two co-producers on 'The Love Invention'. She's a big admirer of the former's Kelly Lee Owens productions, while Girls On Top studio wizard Richard X's work with Róisín Murphy is perhaps the most appropriate reference point for the album. This is disco, but it's a highly contemporary electronic variety of it.

"I wanted something that was very rhythmic and dancey, with elements of retro synthesiser electro. But I also wanted it to sound very modern, especially the production."

A good example is 'Digging Deeper Now', which pairs Alison with Claptone, the German DJ and production duo who wear medieval plague doctor masks at all times. Well, we think they wear them at all times…

"I never met them because we did everything remotely, but I kept thinking I might run into them and wondered if I'd see their faces," she laughs. "They're very Goldfrapp, I know, but to me they look Venetian or something. A strong look, definitely."

Many of the tracks on 'The Love Invention' would seem to have double meanings, revealing her multifaceted musical tastes and her thirst for new concepts.

"When I'm writing, I start with an idea that might be really personal, but then it often mutates into a more general theme. It alternates between being real and fantasy."

So while the lyrics of 'Digging Deeper Now' explore her ever-shifting status – "Everything has changed / In my head, in my heart" – they reflect the global upheaval of the last three years too.

"Everyone went through a lot of changes," she considers. "I did, personally and in my work life, but I think everyone went through a sort of metamorphosis. So it's about looking inside and finding out what's happening. When you create something, you're trying to peel back the layers and look deeper. For me, writing is like I'm trying to reach some other place, some kind of Utopia."

This is also what drives 'The Beat Divine', the first track she recorded with Richard X and almost a manifesto. She says it's about "the idea of music and dancing as this other being". The insistent 'NeverStop' similarly appears to address notions of change, human connections and spells of contemplation during lockdown, hence the lines, "How do you see yourself? / How do you imagine the world around you?".

"There's also a lot of humour in the song," she insists. "I like the idea that there's a therapist asking that question and then this character is going, 'Well, I can sort of see this happening".

Has she ever had therapy?

"I've never been to a therapist, no. That's not the sort of thing they'd ask, but they might do if you were going to write a film script or something…"

Alison can frequently be every bit as mysterious and elusive in interviews as she is in her videos and her stage shows. I've been told beforehand not to ask her any personal questions and while I largely respect that, I know she never gives much away anyhow. As she sings on the title track of 'The Love Invention', "You can be anything you want", a line that seems to sum up her shapeshifting unknowability, which is something quite rare in the world of modern pop.

D

escribed as a "dancefloor high priestess" by her record label, it's been a journey of continual evolution to Alison's current incarnation. Along the way, Goldfrapp videos have portrayed her as a strict ringmistress ('Train'), a scantily clad nurse ('Number 1'), and even a disembodied face ('Strict Machine').

Alison grew up in Alton in Hampshire, the daughter of a one-time army officer, and the last time I interviewed her she told me how she'd been looked down on at the town's convent school. She wasn't the most academic of pupils and she was later made to leave, ending up at a local comprehensive. I wonder if this experience has driven her desire to be whatever she wants to be – whether others like it or not – but she doesn't agree.

"I think I've always been like that," she insists. "The other day, someone asked if I remembered my first-ever performance and my memory is of it being at Brownies, standing on a stage spouting out this poetry I'd written. I must have been seven or something. It was gobbledegook, but I thought it made total sense. Apparently I'm dyslexic. I've always had this chameleon thing as well, you know, dressing up and thinking, 'I'm going to be this today'. So it's just been a natural progression."

It hasn't worked out too badly, although there have been a number of unexpected turns along the way. When Goldfrapp followed the blockbusting electro-glam of 'Supernature' with the bucolic folk of 'Seventh Tree', for instance.

"Financially and commercially, that was probably the most ridiculous thing to do," admits Alison. "But you've got to follow your instincts, haven't you?"

Indeed. And now those instincts have led her back to disco, which she'd first loved in her teens, at which point she was dressing like a punk but listening to Giorgio Moroder's Donna Summer productions.

"I loved those grand melodies, the dramatic arrangements, and the beats that felt epic and euphoric," she says. "I used to go to the local community centre disco and I remember there was this girl who always dressed like Debbie Harry. In fact, she was called Debbie. She looked so cool, but I wasn't into the music they played there. It didn't have enough melody for me. So I was secretly listening to groups like Earth, Wind & Fire and also to The Carpenters. Karen Carpenter's voice just seemed unreal somehow. Very rich, but quite low. It sounded totally synthetic, like it had been manufactured."

The seeds of Goldfrapp's glam element had been planted before this, though. Alison's older sisters were huge T. Rex and Roxy Music fans.

"One of my sisters wore really wild clothes and that's how I got the whole glam thing in my head. And then there was my dad, who listened to classical music. So there was a bunch of stuff going on in our house."

It's not hard to see how Goldfrapp's music ended up where it did. Alison's love of electronic sounds came later, initially with Joy Division and then with Prince.

"I was obsessed with Prince. I was really into his sound and his production. It was just so lush."

When she went to college, where she studied fine art, she set up a little studio in her flat. And then almost immediately disassembled it.

"I got rid of everything. I found it really intimidating having all this equipment. I thought, 'I could be spending the next 10 years in this room'."

Fatefully, she was spotted doing some performance art at a party by Paul and Phil Hartnoll from Orbital.

"Weird and wonderful," she laughs. "They'd go, 'Alison, what are you doing this afternoon?', and I'd mosey on down to their place in Shoreditch and improvise into the microphone."

Some of her improvisations surfaced on 'Are We Here?', a highlight of Orbital's 1994 colossus, 'Snivilisation'. A little later on, she also worked with Tricky, another once-in-a-generation artist, singing on 'Pumpkin' for the Bristol trip hop maverick's 1995 album, 'Maxinquaye'.

"I sent him this cassette of things I'd been doing," she says. "I sent him something with my voice completely slowed down, which he liked."

What was it like working with Tricky?

"He's a total character," she grins. "Really interesting. He introduced me to lots of amazing music and, you know, opened up another door for me. And he could be proper tricky! I mean, yeah, he is intense. I've seen him live since I was working with him and he's incredible to watch. He's definitely followed his own path."

During this period, she even did some backing vocals for Bryan Ferry, witnessing the power of stardom, charisma and magnetism at unusually close quarters.

"Bryan was like, 'I've got this tune… and we could do this and we could do that…'. I was like, 'Er, yeah, OK'. Then he stood in front of me and started singing and doing those moves that he does… and I was all, 'Oh my god! It's fucking Bryan Ferry!'. It was like I'd suddenly realised it was actually him and I was completely starstruck. I became really nervous and wobbly and I couldn't talk. I remember being stunned by what a beautiful voice he has. Hearing it in that room with no effects and seeing those moves…"

A

lison Goldfrapp first met Will Gregory in 1999 and the pair had signed a deal with Mute by the end of the year. The rest, as they say, is history. The way that Goldfrapp operated wasn't always spontaneous, though.

"Some things would come quickly, but other times we'd have an idea and keep coming back to it, or we'd spend a lot of time doing the arrangement."

Which is in stark contrast to Alison's more recent practice as a solo artist.

"I think working more quickly has been really good for me," she says.

It's interesting that it's taken her so long to produce a solo album. Is it easier knowing that she already has an audience, or does feeling that she has to live up to what she's done before bring its own pressures?

"A bit of both. Absolutely. I suppose you think, 'Everybody will say I'm mad'. They'll be asking, 'Why is she doing that?'. So, yeah, a bit of both."

She's into her third decade as a performer now. Has she noticed lots of changes during that time?

"Even since 2017, I think the situation has changed a lot," she ponders, referring to the six-year period since Goldfrapp's 'Silver Eye' album. "It's very hard for singers and musicians to make money. Other things have vastly improved, though. All in all, it's much healthier."

What sort of things?

"I love Instagram and the direct contact you can have with fans. And I can go onto Spotify and listen to anything, anywhere in the world. There's far less snobbery about music now, with different genres all fusing together. I love that. I think that's a much more exciting way to be."

Is it a better time for women to be making music than it was when she started out?

"Yes. There are a lot of great female artists who are speaking their mind. Taylor Swift is quite incredible in that respect. Very intelligent. But it would still be nice to see more females in the technical areas – in the studio, behind the mixing desks… those sort of things."

Another major change, she believes, is that journalists can no longer get away with saying or asking things they did even just a few years ago. She recalls one particularly eye-watering incident, when a European interviewer told her, "You and Will Gregory are like that Pet Shop Boys song – 'I've got the brains / You've got the looks / Let's make lots of money…" She is still aghast today – and rightly so.

"I remember thinking, 'So which one of us are you saying has the brains and which one has the looks?'. You know, 'What am I being told here?'."

On another occasion she was asked, "Do you think you should be wearing short skirts at the age of 40?".

"They were quite aggressive about it. Like, you know, 'What the fuck are you doing wearing that?'. There have been all sorts of crazy things like that. I'd say people are generally far more respectful these days."

Alison is now 57, but she seems to be very much a part of the current musical firmament. Is the industry less ageist than it used to be?

"Well, it's funny because when I see people on 'Top Of The Pops' from the 1970s, they always look younger than I remember them when I was a kid," she reflects. "I suppose it's because everyone seemed older then. I was singing in this band when I first started out and there was another singer who was much younger than me. I was 25 and she was going, 'You're not going anywhere, you're 25!'. So it was a sanction already. I always clung to the fact that Debbie Harry was well into her 30s when she became successful.

"We do seem to live in a society where you become invisible once you hit a certain age. Male, female, whatever. I suppose that's why Madonna gets flak, but it's great she's out there. It's the same with The Rolling Stones, although it's like they have managed to change the rules. But it's especially pleasing that women aren't being criticised for it as much as they were 30 years ago."

'The Love Invention' is a very clubby record. Does she still go clubbing?

"Is it that clubby?" she asks. "There are pop influences there too. To answer your question, I like being outside, so I don't go to clubs much actually. I never really did. Well, apart from one stint. There's something extraordinarily life-affirming and joyous about dancing with a lot of people, but my idea of a good place to dance, a good place to party, would be on a beach."

We've been talking for about an hour and Alison's PR appears on mute in the Zoom window, giving me a silent nudge that I should be asking my last few questions. The last time I interviewed her, it was over a couple of bottles of wine in a restaurant and the conversation went on for ages.

The world is totally different now, but it's not just the Zoom format that makes everything seem more formal. With Alison's PR sitting in on the call and monitoring proceedings, it makes me curious to know whether navigating modern celebrity – with all its infringements and invasions – necessitates keeping lots of things at arm's length, so the person behind the music is able to remain guarded and protected.

"I don't know what to say to that," she replies. "Has it been deliberate? Well, I don't think I'm particularly famous, so it's probably been quite easy. But I have recently joined TikTok, so maybe everything will change!"

She chuckles and then evades the question to tell me that she likes to lose herself in visuals.

"Visuals are something that excite me. I feel like they're a big part of what I'm doing. And I've worked with Mat Maitland for a very long time. When I was making the music, I could really see myself in his visual world."

She goes on to talk about how pleased she is to be touring again – she's hitting the festivals this summer and playing North and South America next year – and how the closing track of 'The Love Invention', the dreamy, sensual and slower 'SLoFLo', represents another radical departure for her. She hints at there being more solo records to come too.

While still conscious of the request not to ask any personal questions, I'm determined to take away one thing – however small – about Alison's life beyond the music business. Does she, for instance, have any hobbies?

"I love staring out of the window," she states in an obvious deflection, turning to the left, seemingly to stare out of an actual window. "I think that's very important…"

She pauses for a moment or two, apparently to reconsider her answer.

"That is a good question," she allows. "At the moment, I'm not doing a lot other than working. I've got 3,000 sleeves to sign, so presently I'm surrounded by boxes and they've got to be done by Thursday. Anyway, where were we? OK, I do a lot of exercise – pilates and the gym – and I love walking. As I said, I like being in nature. Somebody once asked me how I cope with living in London. I cope by leaving it a lot."

She roars with laughter and then suddenly submits another tiny snippet about her life away from music.

"Oh, I do have a new hobby… I like ping-pong," she reveals, explaining that she got into it during lockdown because it was easy to play outside. "I love it. I even took some lessons in the end, so now I'm pretty good."

And after 75 minutes of verbal to-and-fro, it's not difficult to imagine that ping-pong is something Alison Goldfrapp is more than pretty good at.

'The Love Invention' is out now on Skint

OUT OF THE BLUE

Set to light up Cheshire's Jodrell Bank once again, Bluedot 2023 promises another eclectic bill of music, popular science, immersive events and "cosmic culture". In anticipation, here's our essential pick of who and what to see. Prepare for blast-off...

PHOTO: JODY HARTLEY

CARNIVAL ATMOSPHERE

GRACE JONES - PHOTO:ANDREA KLARIN

2MANYDJS

Intergalactic sounds, in-your-face science, out-there arts, and more – the best bits of Bluedot 2023, specially selected for you

WORDS: VELIMIR ILIC

Set amid the lush greenery of Jodrell Bank Observatory in Cheshire, under the gaze of the imposing and iconic Lovell Telescope, the sixth Bluedot Festival will run from 20 to 23 July this year. Once again, it combines music of all hues with talks from leading scientists, culture, comedy, family experiences, art installations and a heck of a lot more. An incredible mix. But where to begin? Well, if you'll allow us to be your guide, here's our essential pick of the good stuff…

Bluedot has always been grounded in its adventurous, expertly curated music, and 2023 is no exception. There are bill-topping sets from Róisín Murphy, Leftfield, Pavement and Young Fathers, all promising their own idiosyncratic and dynamic turns.

But the first night under the stars is special, and opening proceedings on Thursday evening will be composer and pianist Max Richter with the BBC Concert Orchestra. His 'Recomposed' versions of Vivaldi's 'The Four Seasons' have a contemporary nuance that is all Richter's own, particularly 2022's 'The New Four Seasons', on which he employs a vintage Moog for essential atmospheric depth. No doubt he'll also dip into 2004's acclaimed work, 'The Blue Notebooks' – a masterclass of classical/electronic melancholy.

The inimitable Grace Jones is the one who really catches the eye, though. The serial exhibitionist certainly belies her 75 years – stylish, distinctive and energetic, her Sunday night headline slot promises much. Expect the unexpected: artful theatrics and prowling performances of 'Love Is The Drug', 'Slave To The Rhythm' and other such classics, delivered in that gloriously intimidating voice, tinged with inherent edge and menace.

As usual, there's a panoply of other must-see acts. Always captivating, Cardiff's Gwenno will draw on her three glorious albums to date. Singing in Welsh and Cornish, her lyrics are both personal and political, set against a heady electronic/psych/folk backdrop, all beguilingly strange and cosmic. Creep Show – John Grant with Wrangler (Stephen Mallinder, Benge and Phill Winter) – make a welcome return to the stage too, on the back of their cracking new long-player, 'Yawning Abyss'. Steeped in vintage synths and "musical experiments", it's noticeably more direct than 2018's heavily treated 'Mr Dynamite', especially the title track, which comes on like "'Axel F' covered by Vangelis". Yep, that good.

RÓISÍN MURPHY

The trademark shoegaze, synthpop and crunching noise of TVAM, led by Joe Oxley, always feels more potent and powerful when played live. Fusing contemporary jazz and left-field electronics, Bristol experimental collective Ishmael Ensemble are a scintillating proposition too. Both are well worth catching in the flesh.

On Sunday, the Telescope Spectacular will be a special after-dark collaboration between Max Cooper and MESH, a creative community rooted in music, digital art, film, installation, code and architecture. Their immersive 3D/AV art piece will be projected onto the Lovell Telescope, backed by Cooper's pulsating electronic/ambient soundtrack. It'll be quite something – check out Cooper's Instagram and Twitter feeds for a taster.

Throw in late-night sets by the likes of David Holmes and 2ManyDJs (no intros needed), the woozy, clubby interjections of south-east London producer Coby Sey, and the effervescent no wave/post-punk/disco groove of MADMADMAD, and that's quite a sonic statement of intent.

With this year's Bluedot theme being "Space Carnival", the intergalactic goings-on are centred on 'Doctor Who'. The venerable Time Lord is celebrating his 60th anniversary this year, and Sunday will be devoted to a host of 'Who'-related performances, screenings and talks, curated by the folks at Delia Derbyshire Day alongside comedian/'Who' expert Toby Hadoke.

And 'Doctor Who' wouldn't be the same without eccentric national treasures the Radiophonic Workshop – turn the page for our interview with RW's Dick Mills and Peter Howell – who will present their own special 'Who'-centric set. Wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey fun for all, not to be missed.

There are also welcome nods to David Bowie. Adam Buxton's 'BUG' is a special Bowie edition incorporating music videos, rare clips, cartoons and comedy. If you've seen his wonderful animated skit of Bowie in the studio with Brian Eno and Tony Visconti, you'll know what to expect. And there's a screening/talk with Brett Morgen, the director, writer and producer of 2022's 'Moonage Daydream', a mind-blowing, kaleidoscopic "cinematic odyssey" snaking through the singer's life and career.

Delving into their respective acclaimed biographies, there are sessions with Mogwai's Stuart Braithwaite, Lias Saoudi of Fat White Family and ex-Lush singer Miki Berenyi, whose 'Fingers Crossed: How Music Saved Me From Success' was Rough Trade's 2022 book of the year.

Highlighting human creativity, curiosity and innovation, Bluedot's focus on the wonders of science will no doubt be as eye-opening as ever, with engaging talks and workshops from leading experts in space exploration, technology, physics and the environment. Look out for astrophysicist Chris Lintott ('The Sky At Night') and musician Steve Pretty's 'Universe Of Music', helping us understand the cosmos via astronomy, jazz and a drumming robot. 'The Northern Lights: A Rough Guide' does just what it says on the tin, while 'Brainiac Live' is out-and-out scientific mischief, with "exploding dustbins, combusting microwaves and live daredevil stunts". Don't try this at home, kids.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. With interactive, family-friendly spaces (head for the Luminarium, with its labyrinthine tunnels and domes, illuminated by radiant light and colour), visual arts, twilight processions, dancers and silent discos also in the mix, it's shaping up to be quite the carnival – a big intergalactic riot of colour, sound and fun. Roll up, roll up!

Bluedot takes place from 20-23 July at Jodrell Bank Observatory, Cheshire. For more, visit discoverthebluedot.com

THE GREATEST SHOW IN THE GALAXY

This year marks the 60th anniversary of 'Doctor Who' and the **Radiophonic Workshop** are contributing to the celebrations with a special Bluedot performance. Workshop veterans Dick Mills and Peter Howell have set the TARDIS co-ordinates

WORDS: BOB FISCHER

"We cover all grounds with the live show, and people treat us very generously," says Dick Mills, smiling modestly. "We get octogenarians who burst into tears if we talk about 'Blue Peter' or 'Crackerjack!', but we also get youngsters, who are completely up to date with everything."

It's 65 years since the founding of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop, and 60 years since the first episode of surely its most acclaimed client – 'Doctor Who'. I'm honoured to be in the company of two men whose careers in sound production and composition are inextricably linked to this brace of charmingly eccentric institutions.

Since 2013, Dick Mills and fellow Workshop veteran Peter Howell have joined erstwhile BBC colleagues Paddy Kingsland and Roger Limb – alongside musical director Mark Ayres – to form a band whose live performances are an outright celebration of this affectingly nostalgic legacy.

Dick, who is now 86, joined the Workshop in its infancy in 1958, and swiftly found himself pressed into service on some of the BBC's most iconic productions of the decade. On TV, it was Nigel Kneale's unsettling sci-fi serial, 'Quatermass And The Pit'. On radio, it was 'The Goon Show' – arguably the template for every forward-thinking British comedy movement of the last seven decades.

"There was an engineering vacancy, and I applied for it," he shrugs. "And my lonely application was successful, because nobody else bothered. So I joined the Workshop, and the rest… just happened."

Peter, a relative youngster at 75, arrived in 1974. He had a background in studio management at the BBC, but his formative years also included a string of home-recorded psychedelic folk albums. Unfamiliar with the work of the late 1960s East Sussex outfit Agincourt? Then a world of gentle delights awaits you. Even these esoteric experiences, though, left Peter unprepared for his first commission as a Radiophonic Workshop member, devising the sound of a flying steak and kidney pie for a BBC Schools programme.

"I remember the producer reporting back that it was 'adequate'!" he grins.

But it's their respective associations with 'Doctor Who' that have proved the most enduring. Dick's long-standing credit for the show's "special sound" began in 1963, when he assisted Delia Derbyshire in creating her startling electronic arrangement of Ron Grainer's legendary sci-fi theme tune.

"There was a very high resistance with Delia and me, to making anything that might be recognisable," he recalls. "However you press regular instruments into action, they just haven't got the 'what on earth is that?' factor. So we got the Workshop engineer to stretch a steel wire the length of a 19-inch blank plate, and that was the thing we twanged. Which then had to be manipulated to form the notes. And the 'ooo-we-ooo' machine was a wobbulator that Delia managed to play like this… hang on, let me put my hand up…"

He makes a dextrous double-digit movement in front of his laptop webcam.

"So there was nothing that forced regular tonal qualities or interludes onto us."

His relationship with 'Doctor Who' began in earnest in 1980. With incoming producer John Nathan-Turner keen for the show's music to reflect a burgeoning synthpop zeitgeist, Peter was tasked with creating a dramatic reworking of that iconic theme. No pressure, then?

"I *did* feel the pressure," he affirms. "But Paddy Kingsland was extremely helpful, he was my go-to pair of ears. I'd play bits to him and say, 'If this isn't going anywhere, let's stop now and not waste any more time'. But he kept on nodding, so that was alright. And, as with Delia's version, I didn't want to make anything where people could sit in the pub and say, 'Ah, I know how he did that, he used a Casio thingummybob'. So I made it an amalgam of various techniques. I remember being very in awe of Delia's bassline. I loved that 'whump whump whump'."

"She did that as a separate track, on the front of every main note!" adds Dick. "She slid up to them."

"I did exactly the same thing, by playing the notes then turning the tape upside-down," smiles Peter. "I had to reproduce it somehow."

They both agree that the 50-odd live shows they've racked up since 2013 have been an unexpected and delightful postscript to the Workshop's illustrious story.

"It's great fun," smiles Dick. "I came to public performance late in life, and for the first few years I didn't realise people were there to witness a 'happening'! And that 'happening' just happened to include… well, whatever happened. At Rough Trade, we were up one end of a long hallway with the sound mixer on the right under a balcony, and we couldn't communicate with him unless he stood up and waved his hat. And it went wrong…"

"It went into a digital loop and kept on playing the same four bars!" laughs Peter.

"Afterwards, I went around apologising to people," adds Dick. "And they said, 'Why? What happened?'."

Their mutual enthusiasm for their work – and for 'Doctor Who' itself – is infectious. Fans worldwide are, of course, already excited about the show's 60th anniversary in November. There's the return of an old Doctor, David Tennant, to look forward to, followed by the new adventures of his successor, Ncuti Gatwa. In the build-up to all this, the Radiophonic Workshop are performing at this year's Bluedot Festival. Presumably, with a celebratory set that draws heavily on the show's ever-evolving soundtrack?

"Yes, that's right," confirms Peter. "I don't think I'm letting too much out of the bag if I say it'll be less stop-start than our previous sets. We'll be running things into one another, with lots of video clips from the classic series. So the thematic atmosphere will always be 'Doctor Who'."

Jodrell Bank was, of course, the setting for Tom Baker's childhood-defining 1981 regeneration into Peter Davison as the Fifth Doctor. So will Paddy Kingsland be performing his melancholy score for this pivotal scene in the very shadow of that towering radio telescope?

"My lips are sealed," says Peter, defiantly. But – to paraphrase Tom's final, heartbreaking line – it's clear the moment has been prepared for.

The Radiophonic Workshop will be appearing at Bluedot on Sunday 23 July

WALK THIS WAY

Ahead of **Pavement**'s Saturday night slot at this year's Bluedot, Stephen Malkmus talks about the American indie/slacker outfit's krautrock influences and the surprising electronics that lurk within their sound

WORDS: MARK ROLAND

Of the headliners topping this year's Bluedot knees-up, Pavement are the sonic outliers. They fly the flag for 1990s guitar-slinging, slacker rock, whereas Grace Jones, Young Fathers, Leftfield and Max Richter… not so much.

You may not readily associate Pavement with science and electronics and all that cool sci-fi stuff that makes Bluedot the essential British festival, but listen again. Across all five of Pavement's decade-spanning albums – from 1992's 'Slanted And Enchanted' to their 1999 swansong ,'Terror Twilight' – the discerning listener will find textures, found sounds, interludes of weirdness and experimentation, and even synthesisers.

Post-punk references and some very on-message krautrock stylings were always present in the appealing sprawl of Pavement's output. And if you need any more evidence, Stephen Malkmus, the band's singer, songwriter and main mover, dropped 'Groove Denied' in 2019, a solo album featuring a collection of laboratory experiments with an electronic music workflow.

And so to the subject at hand – Bluedot 2023. Speaking from his home studio in Portland, Oregon, Malkmus is every bit as droll and laid-back as you'd expect. Is he aware that Pavement will be playing under the vast radio telescope?

"It's a techy festival, right?" he says. "That's alright by me! I see that Bluedot is our planet, I see there's a Saturn stage. I'm into this. My daughter's going to uni next year, and I'm back in touch with caring about academics and science in any shape or form."

It's literally the only festival where you are likely to bump into an actual astronaut, I tell him.

"Amazing," he drawls. "I did see a guy on the website doing like, a Ted Talk. He could have been an older DJ wearing the little microphone, he could have been in Orbital or he could have been a scientist."

It could have been Tim Peake, the British astronaut who went to the International Space Station in 2015 and was wandering around the festival last year.

"I'm into that," says Malkmus. "I'm going to experiment with walking around. We don't have anything to do. There's a few days before our next show. And it's family-friendly and stuff."

He's checking out the Bluedot website as we're speaking.

"Oh yeah, it was him, he was an astronaut."

Was the young Stephen Malkmus the kind of kid who would take a screwdriver to a radio set and dismantle it?

"Not really," he laughs. "I wasn't even into video games, dude. I was more the kid that would take apart the bike and then couldn't put it back together. One brief summer, we would ride around

on our BMX bikes, find a dead bird, eat too many cherries off a tree and get a stomach ache, go swimming… it was the suburbs, kind of rural, California outdoorsy, warm.

"Once high school came – this sort of relates to the festival – the computer room there was this new exotic thing, where they had very early Apple computers – 1982 or something – and there were guys going in, and you were like, 'What are they doing?'. It was definitely 'Revenge Of The Nerds'. It was an era of nerds and athletes… it seems a little more homogenous now, in our town at least. You can't really tell. Everybody wants to do computer science, because they think it's the best living you can get."

We exist in a world created by the revenge of the nerds. And Bluedot is the revenge of the nerds festival.

"That was the future. We could never have imagined how much life would change from that little room to now – in a social sense as well as the computers."

It's safe to assume that young Stephen Malkmus was obsessed with guitars. What did he think of synths back then?

"We had a piano in our house," he remembers. "For better or worse, because of my generation, I always thought of a synthesiser as an electric version of a piano with different sounds. Even a Moog. If it was monophonic, I was like, 'Oh, you can just play a melody, you can't play chords'. I played bass in a punk band, and had biases about guitars and rock music. It was like our social thing.

"We had a DX7 on 'Slanted And Enchanted'. I thought it was a deliberately cheesy synthesiser that had terrible sounds, but I used them because no one else would touch them in 1990, when Pavement started. I had a bunch of Moogs after the DX7 irony piano. I finally got a Memorymoog on tour. It's this giant tank with a million sounds, and I started to use it as a songwriting thing for 'Terror Twilight'. Before that, I would throw it on top of a Pavement song, for texture or to signify that we like Stereolab too. Or we're into jams."

Ah yes, the krautrock tendency. It lurks within Pavement like a permanent unsettling shadow and can be heard most vividly on 'Stop Breathin' from 1994's 'Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain'. Then in 2012, Malkmus covered the entire Can album 'Ege Bamyasi' with German band Von Spar at a festival in Cologne. Don't even bother looking up what the vinyl artefact of that performance fetches on Discogs.

"I got into Can first," he says, when I quiz him about his affection for krautrock. "I heard them, but I didn't know who they were. I worked at a college radio station – we're a student band, we can just get that out the way – but I'd hear all this cool stuff, and specifically there were older guys who were into The Fall. I didn't know who The Fall were when I was a freshman in 1984. They were also into The Mekons and krautrock.

"I saw Can album covers, I didn't know what it was, but I was like a moth to the flame. They started as a garage band and did this really experimental prog and scary acid music. With them, there was a darkness that I always appreciated. There was something more than the sum of its parts, and that wasn't necessarily nice, but I always liked it. It appealed to my punk side."

Pavement's Bluedot headline slot is their only UK gig of 2023 and follows a run of sold-out shows at London's Roundhouse last autumn. It's an Electronic Sound Bluedot highlight, and Malkmus is promising a fine time will be had by all. The band's in good shape and sounding sharper than their sometimes messy live performances of the 1990s.

"We have made more effort to make it better," he promises. "For people who haven't heard us in 10 years it's going to sound different, and it'll be fun for you. We rehearsed a lot more and want to make this round of tours awesome and refreshing. When you're drunk and young it's OK, but when you're drunk and old it's kind of pathetic or something, you know? That kind of idea. I'm applying that as a metaphor for the music. We also don't want to have old-man quiet amps and sound too good. It's striking a balance, I guess."

Pavement will headline the Lovell Stage at Bluedot on Saturday 22 July

ASK ME ANOTHER...

Fancy a few snappy Q&As with some of the big movers and shakers at Bluedot 2023? Of course you do. Step up Creep Show's **John Grant**, **Stephen Mallinder** and **Benge**, Radiophonic Workshop's **Peter Howell**, **Johnny Lynch** aka The Pictish Trail, **David Maclean** of Django Django, **Ian Parton** of The Go! Team, former Lush singer **Miki Berenyi** and Bluedot festival director **Ben Robinson**

INTERVIEWS: VELIMIR ILIC

WHO/WHAT EXCITES YOU MOST ABOUT THIS YEAR'S BLUEDOT?

Ben Robinson: "The space carnival parade on Saturday afternoon – it'll be where the whole audience comes together in costume and high spirits. We're running a drop-in costume-making arena called Craft Punkz so everyone can dress up and get involved."

Johnny Lynch: "I've never been to Bluedot or Jodrell Bank before, so I'm looking forward to seeing the whole site. The best festivals are ones that reinvent a space, or make you feel like you're not just in a car park surrounded by burger vans and chemical toilets."

Stephen Mallinder: "David Holmes. And I just want to stare at the Lovell Telescope."

John Grant: "Róisín Murphy. But since we're playing at the same time and will miss her, I'll prolly just walk about and look at hot dudes. Hope there's some excellent Mexican food available."

David Maclean: "Looking forward to seeing Leftfield. I've been a huge fan since their first album and they've been so influential. Their new LP is great, too."

Peter Howell: "Max Richter. For his music and the special way he presents it."

Ian Parton: "I'd like to do a guitar solo inside the satellite dish, but unfortunately I can't do guitar solos."

Miki Berenyi: "I'm only there on Saturday, so I'll be meandering about and stopping to see whatever catches my attention. A bit like your granny looking around a bric-a-brac market."

ELECTRONIC MUSIC AND SCIENCE ARE MADE FOR EACH OTHER. DISCUSS.

David Maclean: "I love all the old Radiophonic Workshop and Raymond Scott stuff. The 1950s was the decade when the future seemed so exciting. Science fiction was becoming actual science and electronic music was a big part of that – and still is."

Ian Parton: "Yep, Johnny Ball is the godfather of math rock."

Peter Howell: "Science is the mother of a lot of inventions, one of them being electronic music. Making something artistic out of something technological gives you a real buzz."

John Grant: "Science brought about the vocoder which is the most important invention of all time."

Benge: "All music and sound can be broken down into scientific sine waves, ergo, music is science, and vice versa."

Johnny Lynch: "I reckon if Albert Einstein was alive today, he'd be in a synthpop act. Albert's neat 'tache has 'synthpop' written all over it."

Ben Robinson: "The spirit of exploration through the use and advancement of technology feels at the heart of great electronic music."

IMAGINE YOU'RE IN OUTER SPACE, MARVELLING AT THE WONDER OF THE GALAXY, PLUGGED INTO MUSIC. WHAT'S ON YOUR PLAYLIST?

Ben Robinson: "Great question. This is actually how we built the musical curation of the festival! For me, it would be Mandy, Indiana – their punchy, industrial sounds would rattle a spacecraft and add some life to the quiet of space."

Miki Berenyi: "Cocteau Twins seems apt. But I imagine any audio would be drowned out by me repeatedly bellowing 'OMFG' expletives at the mind-blowing experience."

Peter Howell: "Vangelis, Loneward for the drifty stuff, Isao Tomita and some generative sequencing just inventing itself as it goes along."

Stephen Mallinder: "Everything from Tim Hecker to George Clinton, Drexciya to Erykah Badu, with the narration by William Shatner and Björk."

Ian Parton: "I'd like Alice Coltrane with her floaty harp. Interstellar."

John Grant: "Isao Tomita, Vangelis, Ennio Morricone, DAF, Ministry, Cocteau Twins, Gina X Performance, Devo, Missing Persons, New Order."

Benge: "I'll choose the soundtrack to 'Cosmos'."

Johnny Lynch: "The new Django Django album, 'Off Planet'. Truly cosmic. I'd probably have a load of Adam Buxton podcasts lined up too."

David Maclean: "Jimmy Cauty's 'Space' album. The Orb's 'UFOrb'. And let's throw in Holst's 'The Planets' and the '2001: A Space Odyssey' film score for good measure

WHAT'S ON YOUR FESTIVAL RIDER?

Johnny Lynch: "Oh, I'm not picky. Always nice to have a cold beer before and after the show, but even just a cup of tea is good."

Ben Robinson: "A framed picture of Mae Jemison and some Space Raiders crisps."

Stephen Mallinder: "My rider always seems to comprise of whatever comes in packs of six – six beers, six Penguin biscuits, six actual penguins…"

John Grant: "High-quality yogurt which I can't eat because it clogs up your throat strings. Sparkled water. Apples."

Ian Parton: "We insist on a SodaStream machine… 'get busy with the fizzy'."

ARE FESTIVALS AN OPPORTUNITY TO MEET OTHER ARTISTS AND DEVELOP COLLABORATIONS?

Stephen Mallinder: "Avoid people at all costs."

Benge: "The best place for festival collaborations is usually in the rave tent at 4am. Meet you there!"

Johnny Lynch: "I'd rather see a band play than awkwardly chat to them backstage. My favourite thing about festivals is being able to disappear into the crowd, and enjoy the music along with everyone else."

PHOTO:SCOTT SALT

Miki Berenyi: "Not in my experience, but then I'm not very good at small talk with strangers, so I probably give off the wrong vibes. I'm looking forward to seeing some old friends though."

Peter Howell: "Yes, of course. At Bluedot 2018, I teamed up with the artist Marcus Lyall for his awesome 'Megastructure' projection."

THE RADIOPHONIC WORKSHOP ARE CELEBRATING THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF 'DOCTOR WHO' AT THIS YEAR'S BLUEDOT. WHO'S YOUR FAVOURITE DOCTOR?

Miki Berenyi: "Jon Pertwee was the Doctor when I was little, and I still think of Tom Baker as the whippersnapper replacement. My kids loved Matt Smith the most, but I had a soft spot for Christopher Eccleston. They're all great, though."

Stephen Mallinder: "Tom Baker – he really was 'Doctor Who'.

Ian Parton: "K9."

Benge: "Ken Campbell – although sadly, he didn't get past the audition stage."

John Grant: "I've never seen a single episode, but I have several Radiophonic Workshop records, which I worship."

Peter Howell: "It has to be Tom Baker, because it was during his time that we remade the title music and started to write incidentals."

Johnny Lynch: "I've never watched 'Doctor Who', but I'd have loved Peter Capaldi's Doctor to have actually been Malcolm Tucker. Full of swearing. 'Fucking exterminate, is it? You're about as much use as an over-sized butt plug with a detachable toilet plunger', or something like that. I would definitely have tuned in."

BEST FESTIVAL STORY?

Ian Parton: "We once saw both The Proclaimers brothers, perfectly framed, looking out of a Portakabin window backstage. Quite an image."

Johnny Lynch: "Out of my tree at a festival, very late at night, being kept on my feet by my girlfriend. She suddenly says, 'Oh look, there's your friend Tom. Say hello to Tom'. I can't see who she's talking about, but I start bellowing 'HELLOOOOO TOM' repeatedly at high volume. A man in a bowler hat swivels around and gives me a very dirty look. It was Thom Yorke, ladies and gentlemen. Sorry, Thom. I'm still haunted by that memory."

Stephen Mallinder: "I was playing a festival in Australia with James Lavelle – DJing, if I recall. Very parched earth, the whole place completely filled with smoke. Later, I found out it was caused by a mate who decided to start a fire as a distraction so he could jump the fence! Those were the days."

Ben Robinson: "Moonbounce at Bluedot in 2019 involved an audience – including members of Kraftwerk – watching Tim O'Brien bounce music clips off the moon via two radio telescopes, in a tent at 1am on the evening of the 50th anniversary of the Moon landings."

Peter Howell: "Bluedot 2018. We're appearing with Orbital on the main stage. There's a huge crowd, enjoying every minute, and there's a lot of smoke. I feel dwarfed by the platform Orbital are performing on. My hearing's a bit compromised by the polystyrene bungs wedged in my ears. I don't feel ready to play the bass part of 'Doctor Who' on a Korg MS-20. Phil Hartnoll shouts down, asking if we're all set. I give him a thumbs-up. I am lying. The number starts. We play. Next day, when I see the videos on YouTube, only then do I realise what it was all about. Orbital, the latest purveyors of Ron Grainer's iconic music, are jamming with the Radiophonic Workshop, the original ones, live in front of a sell-out audience in the dark of a summer night beside the Jodrell Bank telescope."

TO THE BEAT, Y'ALL!

With the release of 'Resound NYC', a reimagining and orchestration of his New York-centric hits, Moby reflects on the influence of the Big Apple, the power of the human voice, and hanging out with David Bowie and Lou Reed

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN
PICTURES: LINDSAY HICKS

'Resound NYC' is proof, were it needed, that Moby's heart is never far from New York City. Born in Harlem, Manhattan on 11 September 1965, Richard Melville Hall grew up in a single-parent household in Connecticut, spending his young life yearning for his city of birth and obsessing about how he might get back there one day.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Moby found himself some space in an abandoned industrial building in Manhattan's crack and heroin-infested Meatpacking District, where he began to build his reputation as a DJ and musician. By the time he left NYC 20 years later, he was inhabiting a £5 million, four-storey penthouse in Central Park West – a rags-to-riches story with caveats, as detailed in his eye-poppingly honest memoirs, 'Porcelain: A Memoir' (2016) and 'Then It Fell Apart' (2019).

Around a decade-and-a-half ago, he decided to swap East Coast for West. Speaking from his home in Los Angeles, Moby has requested that we do the interview with audio only, meaning I'm unable to check out his latest neck tattoo, which reads "VEGAN FOR LIFE" in inch-tall, upper-case lettering – a calligraphic slab running from below his jawline on the right-hand side to just above the top of his ribcage. He makes up for this lack of visual contact, though, with an openness and self-awareness that you'd usually be hard-pressed to find outside a 12-step recovery meeting.

"When I was growing up, I fetishised New York City and I couldn't imagine anything better than being a musician living there," he remembers. "But when I got sober about 15 years ago, I very quickly realised that New York is a paradise if you are a drunk, drug-addicted musician, and that it's a very challenging place to live if you become a middle-aged, sober musician. LA's more about waking up early and going hiking. It's just an easier place to avoid temptation. For better or worse, I'm a Los Angeleno at this point."

For 'Resound NYC', which is Moby's second orchestral album on Deutsche Grammophon (the first being 2019's 'Reprise'), he's decided to home in on work written and recorded in the Big Apple between 1994 and 2008, featuring outlandish arrangements and sonic surprises. It's quite the undertaking for an electronic musician who once assumed he'd be a philosophy professor and make music in his bedroom that no one would ever hear.

While residing in the derelict factory, the 20-something Moby got himself a job at a local record shop alongside his DJ gig at Mars nightclub, which all helped him scrape by.

"I was working in this weird record store, and part of my job was putting the records away," he remembers. "Every time I put a Deutsche Grammophon record away, it almost felt like I was holding something sacred, because the artwork was really beautiful. That big yellow label logo was just so European and very sophisticated."

The fragments that form 'Resound NYC' were already configuring, though he had no idea until several decades later, when Deutsche Grammophon asked him if he'd like to make an orchestral greatest hits album.

"I immediately thought of those moments in the 80s when I was living in my abandoned factory and holding Deutsche Grammophon records, these precious totems."

As the follow-up to 'Reprise', 'Resound NYC' is a sequel of sorts. There are key differences, though.

"That first record was very traditionally orchestral – we recorded a quintet here in LA and went to Hungary to record a giant orchestra," he states. "My A&R person, Christian Badzura, encouraged me to explore what an orchestra could be in 2023."

So what might that entail?

"It could involve putting cannons onstage," he suggests. "It could involve turntables and analogue synths. So for this record, I let each song be a hybrid of very traditional orchestral elements and much less traditional orchestral elements, like Mellotrons and Moog synths and distorted samples, in order to build an 'orchestra'."

On 'Reprise', Moby worked with some of the best in the business – engineer Alan Meyerson and renowned conductor and arranger Joseph Trapanese, although this time he felt confident enough in what he'd learned to do most of the arranging himself. Furthermore, he jumped on a Mellotron belonging to famed songwriter Linda Perry to add some analogue authenticity to proceedings.

"The Mellotron is, as you know, an incredibly temperamental piece of gear," he says. "The first time I used one was on 'South Side' from the 'Play' album. We rented one and it took hours just to get it in tune. But once it *was* in tune, it sounded phenomenal. My friend Linda Perry had a Mellotron, too, so we would play around with it quite a lot. For this record, it was a combination of using an old idiosyncratic Mellotron and trying to get it to work and then, if I'm being honest, using some of the Arturia Mellotron samples."

It's interesting that Moby mentions A&R because, in a sense, he's always been something of an A&R man himself. He's a connoisseur of the human voice, going to great lengths to capture it in all its infinite glory, both with living persons and with preserved voices from the past.

The most obvious example of this is 1999's multi-platinum seller, 'Play', where he sampled the field recordings of American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax and breathed creative life into long-deceased singers such as Bessie Jones and Vera Hall. On the new album, there are household names such as Gregory Porter, who also appeared on 'Reprise', and others you may be less familiar with, like Lady Blackbird.

"When I was 13 or 14, I desperately wanted to be a great singer," says Moby. "I would listen to David Bowie and these other amazing vocalists and think how remarkable it would be to be one of them. And then I realised pretty quickly that I'm an average singer. I'm not terrible, my pitch and range are OK, but I'm certainly not a great singer."

By the time he started making records himself, sampling voices was de rigueur for most electronic musicians. Once he achieved some success, it also became apparent that he would need to learn how to work with singers who had fabulous voices.

"I've worked with so many – everybody from David Bowie to Britney Spears, from Michael Jackson to Ozzy Osbourne to Chris Cornell – probably thousands. Finding and working with a vocalist is one of the most frustrating and rewarding aspects of making records."

He's not feeling threatened by AI – yet.

"Forgive me for stating the obvious, but AI is remarkable at creating synthetic vocal perfection," he says. "However, as far as I know, it will never make Leonard Cohen. It'll never make Lou Reed. It'll never make a duet between Mark Lanegan and Kris Kristofferson – like on 'Reprise'. Maybe I'll be proven wrong when quantum computing hybridises itself with AI, but I don't know if there's enough computing power in the universe to fake that authenticity and that experience of the human condition."

Referencing the French film director, Jean Renoir, he goes on: "'Technical perfection can only create boredom'." To counter such boredom and stave off technical perfection, he has collaborated with some extraordinary vocalists from around the world on his innovative new electronic label, Always Centered At Night. Launched in June 2022, it pushes in the face of algorithmic digital divination – or at least that's the aim.

His stated goal with the imprint is to create "uncompromising" material that is "emotional, atmospheric and potentially beautiful". So far, he has worked with Aynzli Jones, Serpentwithfeet, Akemi Fox, José James and Gaidaa. Every track is extraordinary in its own way, with remixes attached to each one.

"Always Centered At Night is a way of working with really special writers and vocalists to make idiosyncratic music inspired by the spirit of musical discovery I had in New York in the 80s," he says. "Maybe you had the same experience… you go into a weird record store and hear something you've never heard before, and it opens up a new world to you. You're so fascinated by this piece of music that you walk up to the guy behind the counter and ask, 'What is this?'. I would like each track and remix on Always Centered At Night to be that song."

The project also seems to be about human connection – between the label and its audience, and between Moby and other artists.

"I'd say that 85 per cent of the collaborations are done remotely," he estimates. "Gaidaa, for example, spends her time primarily in Amsterdam and Sudan. Obviously, Amsterdam and Sudan are quite far away from Los Angeles!"

Always on the hunt for new voices, Moby will go to great lengths to find them, whether that's walking the streets or surfing online. A quick DM or email to an artist can often lead to something significant and unique.

"I'm always looking," he declares. "I guess I feel a bit like a more benign version of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the first 'Terminator' movie. You go out into the world only looking for one thing, and I'm looking for voices. Sometimes it's about going on YouTube. Sometimes it's Spotify. Other times, it's just walking around Lower Manhattan going to karaoke places, where I've actually found a couple of singers. It's this constant process of looking for voices, and getting excited and inspired when you find a wonderful voice."

The releases have only been digital so far, although there is some talk of vinyl coming in September, possibly beginning with a compilation – watch this space.

protect
this innocent
defend

On 'Resound NYC', there's a cluster of versions of songs from '18', the 2002 album that maintained Moby's celebrity after the massive success of 'Play', despite the cracks that were starting to appear both personally and creatively. Four tracks take up the first disc, including 'Extreme Ways', featuring the line, "Then it fell apart", which he borrowed for the title of his second tell-all memoir. Looking back, those lyrics seem almost premonitory.

"Oh, it was definitely a premonition," agrees Moby, nodding to the alcoholic rock bottom that was to come. "The lyrics in 'Extreme Ways' are very predictive and anticipatory and, in hindsight, very prescient. But at the time, I had no idea.

"I look back at those years of narcissism, self-involvement, entitlement, drunkenness, debauchery and stupidity, and it's such a challenge to recognise myself. Who was that person who thought all of that stuff was important?"

Moby gained something of a reputation as a ligger, while his promiscuity at that time has passed into legend. Yet in his more urbane moments, he was hanging out at David Bowie's place for dinner with Laurie Anderson and Lou Reed.

"I was one of the three or four people that Lou was nice to," he remembers with a mixture of pride and bafflement. "Every second I was with him I expected him to hate me, because he hated everybody. It's hard to take it personally because he was incredibly unpleasant to everyone except for me and David Bowie. And Laurie Anderson and Bill T Jones. It was almost ridiculous how kind he was to us, and how gentle and lovely, as opposed to the way he was with 99 per cent of the other people on the planet."

There's a delightful story in 'Then I Fell Apart' where Bowie takes Moby aside and plays him 'Slip Away' from his then-unreleased album 'Heathen'. Most children of the 1970s and 80s have to be content with being indirectly introduced to the Stylophone by a since-disgraced children's entertainer (now deceased), but Moby was handed one by Bowie himself.

"If you listen to 'Heathen', the Stylophone keeps popping up there," he says. "It's still such a wonderful, special, broken, fascinating VCA synth."

Bowie had famously used a Stylophone on 'Space Oddity' and went on to snap up a number of them on the nascent eBay website at $100 a pop, which he would then gift to friends as eccentric keepsakes.

"David gave me a bunch of presents," reflects Moby wistfully, as indeed you would if your hero had become your pal. "The most special being the hat that he wore during the making of 'Station To Station', or maybe 'Low'. On the brim he wrote, 'To Moby, love David'. I still have that."

In recent times, Moby's existence has become far more manageable without the drink and drugs, especially since he has given up touring. He now has time to make films, like 'Punk Rock Vegan Movie'.

I mention how his memoirs seem to me to be about moving away from absolutism – whether that's to do with faith (Moby was a serious Christian until the mid-1990s) or hedonism (which he embraced with religious fervour) – although having a "VEGAN FOR LIFE" tattoo on your neck leaves little room for equivocation. These days, Moby sees himself first and foremost as a vegan activist, and the music he makes brings him succour.

"Music is a refuge," he explains. "But, in the interests of self-preservation, I don't read reviews, look at comments, or read articles. I don't."

As for being a "vegan for life" without equivocation, well, he seems cool with that.

"It's been the only unshakeable part of my life," he reasons. "I mean, for me, it hopefully *is* unshakeable. Although I might feel differently if the apocalypse happens and I'm starving to death."

'Resound NYC' is out now on Deutsche Grammophon

TEMPEL PILOT

Having been part of Ash Ra Tempel and its Ashra reincarnation, as well as Wallenstein and the legendary Cosmic Jokers, Harald Grosskopf is krautrock royalty. His scintillating 1986 solo release, 'Oceanheart', is now being reissued and given a contemporary rework by the man himself

WORDS: DAVID STUBBS

"I was excited by sequencers, but there were people who said, 'Oh, this is just artificial music, pressing and twisting knobs'," says Harald Grosskopf, who performed with such krautrock luminaries as Ash Ra Tempel's Manuel Göttsching and Klaus Schulze. "There was a lot of resistance to us, but I really liked what Klaus said… 'Pianos don't grow in fields, violins don't grow on trees'. In France they were more receptive, but not in Germany."

Speaking from his home near Cologne, Grosskopf is recalling the days when Moog synthesisers were such an expensive rarity in West Germany that you could count the number in operation on the fingers of one hand.

"I remember when I first saw Klaus Schulze's Moog system – these four black boxes he bought from Florian Fricke [founder of Popol Vuh], who'd decided to go back to grand piano. It was expensive, but cheaper than a new one – like a laboratory, full of secrets. The very first time Klaus switched on his sequencer, I was so affected by the groove, and it has stuck with me ever since."

That said, Grosskopf was not immediately encouraged to make music of his own.

"When I first touched the Minimoog – the envelope with attack, decay, release – I tried to work the attack and turn the volume up, but I couldn't get it to do it, so I gave up and decided to stick to drumming."

And so he did for many years, until 1980. Then, as electronic music was becoming less of an oddity, even in reluctantly luddite West Germany, he was persuaded to make a solo album for Sky Records. And since he'd been advised that "no one wants to listen to an album of drum solos", he decided to re-educate himself on the synthesiser.

The resulting long-player, 1980's 'Synthesist', is a remarkably accomplished work, combining sequencing and texture in a way that honours both krautrock and more contemporary rhythms, albeit minus the obvious brutalism of DAF and Einstürzende Neubauten.

"I don't know how to write musical notes," admits Grosskopf. "I think I drum on keyboards."

Although 'Synthesist' would later come to be regarded as a cult classic – and the subject of a 2011 remix project involving Oneohtrix Point Never, among others – Grosskopf was disappointed by the reception for its original release.

"It sold 10,000 copies and I thought, 'Woah, what a flop' – in Ashra we were used to selling 30,000 to 50,000. I thought, 'No one is interested in my music', and I didn't listen to it for 10 years. But then, when the internet came along, I got reactions from all over the world."

Disinclined to record a follow-up, Grosskopf resumed working with his Neue Deutsche Welle post-punk project, Lilli Berlin. In 1984, however, with the arrival of samplers further popularising the use of electronics in music, he decided to make a second album, 'Oceanheart', which came out in 1986. That same year saw Kraftwerk's last album proper, 'Electric Cafe'. It seemed their work – the electrification of pop – was complete.

"'Oceanheart' sold even worse than 'Synthesist'," recalls Grosskopf. "The industry had gone into decline. I recorded it in an industrial complex – I always worked with hired equipment and didn't own anything apart from my drum kit. I had an 8-track recorder – it was like home recording, very independent – and I mastered it on a Betamax video recorder. I still own that master, but it took a while to get a digital copy made of it."

'Oceanheart' was also picked up on retrospectively, and deservedly so. The clipped, Cabaret Voltaire-ish riffs and silvery lattices of 'Eve On The Hill', the spiralling patterns and novel pace of 'While I'm Walking', and the looped, hand-played tablas of 'Pondicherry Dream' are the triumphant product of Grosskopf's unfettered approach to music-making and recording. His alternative modes of synthpop, whose suggestions were never widely adopted and therefore feel preserved in their originality, are free of the tropes and cliches of mid-1980s mainstream electronic production.

For the album's reissue, at the suggestion of Bureau B label owner Gunther Buskies, he decided not to put it out for other artists to remix as he'd done with 'Synthesist'. Instead, he rerecorded it himself with the benefit of hindsight, experience ("The naivety I had in those old times is gone") and new equipment, both analogue and digital.

The 2023 release sets the original recordings alongside the upgraded tracks, which are sleekly and subtly modified. As a double album (divided into 'Oceanheart' and 'Oceanheart Revisited'), it's a wonderful demonstration of what was visionary in the 1980s and what electronica is capable of now – both state-of-the-art and drawing on its own history.

"Last year, I was lucky enough to meet an electronic engineer, Tobias Stock, a collector for 20 years of analogue music equipment," says Grosskopf. "Huge reel-to-reel recorders from two-inch to half an inch – everything is in mint condition. For him, it is a hobby. He really likes that someone is using all this equipment. Analogue changes the sound, the dynamic, the filtering here and there, which I really like. Among his collection is a 4-track, one-inch recording machine used by The Beatles. It's great to combine these analogue instruments with the digital."

Born in 1949 and growing up near Hanover, the teenage Harald Grosskopf took a similar path to most would-be West German pop musicians in the 1960s, at a time when the country was still struggling to gain a sense of cultural identity – he played in beat groups covering Anglo-American material, particularly The Beatles.

"We didn't understand what groups like The Beatles were singing," says Grosskopf. "So we just wrote down the syllables. Or a record like 'Purple Haze' by Jimi Hendrix, we couldn't understand. Our version of it – what we wrote down – was very funny. I know the Scorpions did that too because they had even worse English than me."

As well as his own group, Grosskopf would occasionally play with the Scorpions, years before they attained worldwide fame.

"I grew up with the Schenker boys, and I went to kindergarten with Rudolf for a while, so we met each other a lot," he continues. "My band was The Stuntmen and theirs was the Scorpions. I created posters for them and filled in for their drummer three or four times when he was ill. This was around 1965, 1966. There was a very big scene, with everyone trying to be as English or American as possible. We thought the German accent didn't work, that it was a horrible language, so hard – 'Achtung' and all this military imagery.

"But then Kraftwerk appeared and they didn't give a shit. And people liked it because it was special. I remember when I was with my group Wallenstein and we played a little festival, and Kraftwerk were there. They had long hair, strange equipment on tables, instruments I'd never seen. Most people left the event because they just couldn't cope with it. But you know the story. They were very successful in the end."

By the late 1960s, the young German generation were collectively coming to terms with their recent history – the rise and fall of Nazism. It was a subject their parents and grandparents often wouldn't talk about. There were waves of protest, parallel to the demonstrations of May 1968, a convulsive, angry response to the ex-Nazis who were still in prominent positions of power.

"After the Third Reich, Germany had an inferiority complex," reflects Grosskopf. "We tended to copy Anglo-American music for a very long time, but then some of us decided we didn't want to do that anymore. Then all of these instruments appeared, like the Moog synthesiser, which were very unconventional and gave us this amazing freedom."

In search of different modes of expression that might form the basis of a "new" West German sound, musicians looked to the precedent set from the 1950s onwards by the Cologne-based composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and his extreme, avant-garde explorations of electronics and musique concrète.

Stockhausen's work was, in part, a response to the horrors of war, which he had witnessed first hand as a child, and it seemed to open up cosmic realms, representing a reproachful alternative to this fallen world.

"It's amazing what he did," marvels Grosskopf. "Today, you just turn a little knob here and there, but he had hundreds of machines to make those effects. He was quite a role model for us, and American minimalists like Steve Reich – their repetition, their monotony."

The likes of Pink Floyd and The Mothers Of Invention also provided inspiration.

"I paid six Deutsche Marks for a Pink Floyd concert, and I didn't even know who they were," says Grosskopf. "But I really liked them and their originality. Also Cream and Hendrix – I saw him at a huge festival in Germany just before he died."

Unlike the beat scene of the 1960s, the new, fast-maturing generation of West German musicians sought not merely to imitate or cover the psychedelic wave of rock billowing from the West, but to invent for themselves and begin again. Grosskopf made vital contacts.

"I met the Berlin people – Edgar Froese of Tangerine Dream, Manuel Göttsching, Klaus Schulze," he says. "A lot of German rock bands had this competitiveness about who could play the best, who made mistakes, and I didn't like that at all. But with these guys, there was a sort of anarchy. None of them were great technicians on their instruments, but they had something – a confidence, a special feeling. I think Klaus Schulze was the first to compliment me on my drumming – I'd never had that before.

"Later, I heard something of his on the radio, so I wrote him a postcard – I didn't have a phone. He invited me to his place, and we ended up making

HARALD GROSSKOPF 1981 - PHOTO: BUREAU B

four albums together. It was fascinating the way he worked. In my band we rehearsed like crazy, to the last detail. But Klaus would say, 'I'm not telling you anything – you know what's going on'. I loved that great freedom, and since then that's been my way of making music."

Grosskopf lived in Berlin between 1974 and 1987 and became dimly aware of the impact made by the krautrock scene.

"It was the most exciting time in Berlin," he enthuses. "David Bowie was there – he came to a concert I did with Klaus Schulze. I didn't see him, but I know he was very interested in our music. I wasn't aware that the guys who made British industrial music were so into krautrock."

Electronics, Grosskopf realised, were key to this vital sense of self-reinvention. Even if that meant modifying existing instruments, as Tangerine Dream had done in the early days, synths still being too pricey for most musicians.

"Most of them started with Farfisa organs," he recollects. "They created echoes with them, which I always loved, both then and now – it was very important."

This spirit of adventure was sometimes also assisted lysergically.

"Once, on an LSD trip, I grabbed Manuel Göttsching's guitar and Copicat tape echo unit," recalls Grosskopf. "I couldn't play guitar, but I had so much fun, and the echo convinced me there was someone else playing beside me. That was an amazing experience.

"Sometimes it freed minds in ways you don't want to see. Ash Ra Tempel's bassist Hartmut Enke was a very sensitive musician. He had so many great ideas – using a compressor and echo machine on the bass. He created a very long, sustaining bass sound. And on one of those LSD trips he kind of flipped out. He was laughing crazily. He told me how he had detected a single note that could conquer the world, and he was going to tell the Pope about the single note you could make hit records from."

Grosskopf also connected with musicians such as Can's Jaki Liebezeit – a placid man, but one not to be trifled with.

"We did drum sessions together in Cologne," recalls Grosskopf. "He was playing on self-made drums, I was playing on an electronic drum set, and there was this other guy in the studio playing rock riffs over and over on guitar. And Jaki went to him and said, 'Hey, we don't play rock music here'. But this guy carried on playing. So Jaki went up, grabbed his guitar neck and stopped him there and then."

In the 1970s – the era of the Red Army Faction – being an experimental musician, with its attendant appearance, could be perilous.

"In 1977, we toured France with Ashra," recounts Grosskopf. "Three long-haired guys travelling around in this big Mercedes. We were a little drunk and had smoked a joint. Suddenly, this vehicle pulled up and these guys leapt out and put guns to our heads. Luckily, Lutz Ulbrich spoke French and produced his ID card.

"But these security guys were scared, more scared than us. We gave our IDs and they let us go – they didn't give a shit that we were drunk or stoned. And when we got back to the hotel, we found out the Baader-Meinhof group had just killed this German prosecutor, an ex-SS man.

"We were often stopped on the autobahn, with 10 or 12 cops with machine guns surrounding us. Just because of how we looked."

Punk arrived late in West Germany, mutating by 1979 into the Neue Deutsche Welle, a genre that fused it with new wave and electronic influences.

"Punk was a movement I had not much to do with," admits Grosskopf. "We had rebelled against our fathers who had served in the Third Reich and been in the Wehrmacht. That was our rebellion. So was electronic music. We didn't want to be political. Maybe the way we used echo was a means of escaping into space, away from this bourgeois world."

He was amused, though, by how Neue Deutsche Welle made such effective use of the German language for barbed comic effect, as on Lilli Berlin's satirical, minor electropop hit, 'Ostberlin-Wahnsinn' ('Crazy East Berliners').

In recent years, Grosskopf has been gratified to learn of the afterlife of his synth albums. He's been sent recordings of his music played at an Australian rave and has connected with the makers of the 'Stranger Things' soundtrack, who turned out to be huge fans.

"I really like this recognition late in life," he says with a broad smile.

Today, Grosskopf continues to record, at the bottom of his garden in a soundproofed studio, absolutely on his own terms.

"I don't want to have to make music just to survive. Then you start getting corrupted, go mainstream. I preferred doing jobs at industrial fairs, jobs you don't like, rather than making music you don't like."

'Oceanheart' / 'Oceanheart Revisited' is out now on Bureau B

THE STUFF OF DREAMS

After overcoming immense challenges during its gestation, the second album from London producer Nabihah Iqbal – the left-field, intimate and gloriously melancholic 'Dreamer' – is an unequivocal triumph over adversity

WORDS: STEVIE CHICK

"Sometimes I feel like my life is a bit jinxed," says Nabihah Iqbal solemnly.

From the outside, she seems abundantly blessed, having swapped a career as a human rights lawyer to pursue music and received deserved plaudits for her proprietary blend of beatific synthesiser throb and shoegazey guitar sonics. If that's a "jinxed life", most of us would be first in the queue for some of the same.

But when you consider the obstacles Iqbal has overcome to complete her new album, 'Dreamer', her sense of being born under a bad sign is rather more understandable. To make it, she withstood an avalanche of awfulness, including – but not limited to – physical injury, the burglary of her studio and theft of the laptop containing her works-in-progress, a beloved relative suffering a life-threatening illness, and being stranded thousands of miles from home.

It seems she hasn't quite managed to shake off the hex yet, either – our interview was delayed after Iqbal was knocked off her bike following a band rehearsal the night before we were due to chat.

But life's about how you play the hand you're dealt. Throughout everything, Iqbal never relented in her quest to complete 'Dreamer'. Indeed, these challenges shaped the album, its landscape shifting to accommodate the outrageous misfortune, the near-death experiences and the sublimely ridiculous twists of fate, repaying a thousandfold the debt of faith she placed in music many years ago.

Inspiration first came to Iqbal wearing a single rhinestone glove.

"I was really obsessed with Michael Jackson when I was a kid," she remembers, speaking from her London home. "My mum taped a Michael Jackson documentary off the TV for me, and I watched it every single day. And obviously, at the age of three or four I wasn't thinking, 'I'm going to make music when I grow up', but if you connect with it in that special way, you realise it's a powerful force. Even at that age, I realised music can do something to you that nothing else can."

Like a pop-fixated Mr Benn, Iqbal adopted a series of cultural identities (and their related uniforms) in the years that followed. First, she was into Oasis…

"I even got myself a pair of round Liam Gallagher sunglasses and would try to sing like him," she says with a laugh. "Or mimic his poses, at least."

Next, she channelled her inner mosher, spending her weekends in the Stygian swamp that is Camden's Underworld.

"Super-baggy trousers, lots of jewellery, big hoodie," she says, laughing again. "I see Gen-Z kids wearing that stuff now and I'm like, 'It didn't even look good the first time around!'."

By the turn of the millennium, however, Iqbal had begun her journey into electronica. The jagged punk-funk of outfits like The Faint and The Rapture seduced her first, while Miss Kittin and Peaches dragged her further down the rabbit hole. Radiohead's 'Kid A' sealed the deal.

"That album melded guitar music and electronics in the most beautiful way," she muses. "It made me think about those two worlds and my place within them."

At 18, she took a course in music production that gave her a grounding in Cubase.

"I never used it again," she admits. "At least it taught me how to make music on a computer."

But it was DJing that gave her a true sense of direction.

"Some friends started putting on parties in laundrettes around east London, so that was how I DJed for the first time. It was the best feeling to see how you could get people to dance and feel good. I always like mixing unexpected things together and surprising people to move them and affect them."

She began making her own "chopped and screwed" edits of pop hits by Beyoncé and Mariah Carey to drop into her sets. After putting them up on SoundCloud, they caught the attention of Leipzig-based house producer Kassem Mosse, who invited Iqbal to make a record for his Ominira label.

'Mystic Places', a 12-inch credited to her early alter ego Throwing Shade, arrived in 2013 – a glorious showcase of Iqbal's satisfyingly conflicted impulses towards pop and experimentalism, juggling manipulated vocal hooks, heavy synth chords and brittle drum machine pulses.

"The launch party for 'Mystic Places' was the first big event centred around me and my music, and all my friends came," she says. "It really made me feel like I was doing something right. And I just wanted to keep going."

And so she did. Four further Throwing Shade 12-inch singles followed and she also started a regular show on NTS Radio.

"I was studying enthnomusicology at SOAS University and guested on a friend's show to play rare and unusual tracks from parts of the world Western audiences don't usually get to hear."

The station's manager swiftly offered Iqbal a show of her own, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. With further serendipity, her producer at NTS moved on to become A&R at venerated London imprint Ninja Tune and invited Iqbal to sign with the label in 2015.

Her fifth 12-inch, 'House Of Silk', would be her final release as Throwing Shade, and her debut full-length, 'Weighing Of The Heart', arrived under her own name in 2017.

"Other ethnic minority people said they found it inspirational to see somebody like me doing music," she remembers. "You hardly ever see South Asian people in mainstream culture, except if it's on a comedy show where they're making fun of themselves, and that's pretty depressing.

"I wanted to use my real name and be upfront about my identity. Some said, 'You might not get booked for festivals now, because you never see any ethnic names on festival line-ups'. And maybe it did have a negative effect. But I'm happy that I made the change."

There also followed an evolution in her sound. Alongside the atmospheric electronic music that had become her trademark as Throwing Shade, she introduced electric guitar to her palette, fusing the two worlds she'd been ruminating on ever since hearing 'Kid A'.

"It's so versatile, and I never get bored with trying to teach myself some complicated new finger-picking method," she says. "I was performing under my own name now, and working guitar into my music made it more 'me'. It just felt right, and I never looked back."

Iqbal's embrace of the instrument would prove a genius move, creating a unique voice that helped 'Weighing Of The Heart' seduce the critics. The stage was now set for a much-anticipated sequel, but what followed was six years of silence – and some of the toughest experiences of her life.

"It's a bit embarrassing," says Iqbal of the inaugural mishap of the 'Dreamer' era.

While filming an Instagram story in an ancient Greek amphitheatre in Sicily, she slipped and broke her hand. The injury scuppered her plans to spend the summer of 2019 finishing off her second album, and was compounded by a nasty case of burnout – the result of "too much touring and stuff" – which grounded her with serious fatigue at the end of that year.

"I was so sick," she remembers. "But the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me, and I had no real time to rest – I don't earn money in my sleep."

Next, her studio was burgled, and the thieves made off with the laptop on which she'd been recording her new material.

"I lost two years' work – I'd almost finished the album," she recalls. "I didn't care about the computer, but I lost all those ideas, and I hadn't backed any of them up."

The following day, however, she received news that put all her other maladies into perspective.

"My grandad, my favourite person in the world, had had a brain haemorrhage in Pakistan. I was like, 'OK, I just need to go there'."

Iqbal and her mother booked a last-minute flight for the following day. It was the first week of March 2020, and lockdown was imminent.

"We were about the only people in Heathrow," Iqbal remembers. "We ended up stuck in Pakistan for two months."

But the trip would soon prove her first blessing in months.

"My grandad recovered, and I spent those weeks with my family eating good food and finally resting up. And it was there that the seeds of 'Dreamer' were planted. I'd been feeling really depressed over the album and whether I could recreate those lost ideas. I told my grandad, and he said simply, 'It doesn't matter – just start again'."

So she did, abandoning the stolen work and turning a new leaf. The next day, she purchased an acoustic guitar.

"I guess I was going back to basics," she says. "If you typically make music on a computer, you're used to starting something and building up. I didn't have any of my equipment, so it forced me into this very simple approach. But maybe that was for the better, as I was focusing all my energy rather than getting distracted."

She returned from Pakistan with an iPhone full of recordings she'd made using the guitar, her grandfather's harmonium and loop pedal, and she finished the album while working as artist-in-residence at various locations around the UK. One such spot was Cove Park, on the west coast of Scotland.

"There was no internet, and it was a two-hour walk to the nearest shop, so I really focused," she says. "I was reading 'Ode' by Arthur O'Shaughnessy – it's one of my favourite poems: 'We are the music makers / And we are the dreamers of dreams'. It's about the beauty and importance of artistic creation and music, and it's so moving, it makes me cry. That's where the album title comes from."

PHOTO: JOSEPH HAYES

The finished work is astonishing. Iqbal's most ambitious and fully realised vision yet, 'Dreamer' strikes a keen balance between electronic and guitar-oriented sounds. Its 10 tracks skillfully segue from ambient drones gilded by wordless multitracked vocals to the ethereal shoegaze of the title cut and the epic, slow-building, spiritual house of 'Sunflower'. The end result is Iqbal making peace with her divergent influences and interests.

"It's all part of what I do," she says. "Sequencing the album was a challenge, but I conceived it like it was a journey. I want listeners to connect with the more intimate tracks as much as the club-focused ones, to sense that ecstatic feeling through the guitar pieces as much as the electronic ones. I'm trying to evoke the escapism, the pure happiness, that you might get for just a fleeting moment at a club or festival."

There are loftier ambitions at play, too – the hypnotic 'This World Couldn't See Us' is inspired by Iqbal's favourite book, Thomas Hardy's 'Tess Of The D'Urbervilles'.

"The poetry I wrote for the track is inspired by what Tess goes through in the book," she explains. "The refrain – 'This world couldn't see us / This world couldn't keep us' – is about striving for a love or a relationship or a feeling that seems so right, but with the society we live in, it's never gonna survive."

Such drama suits a record with so tortured a backstory.

"I've never cared so much about anything or worked so hard on anything in my life," she says. "The day I finished the album was the best feeling I can remember."

And even if Iqbal hasn't yet quite shaken loose the jinx, she's now making a habit of looking on the bright side. She might have been knocked off her bike a week before, but that's not the memory she's taking home from the day.

"What was important happened earlier – being physically in a room with my band and playing together. It was so emotional. I'd made all this music by myself, and so few people had heard it yet. And suddenly these songs were coming alive. I'd never experienced that before. It was wonderful."

'Dreamer' is out now on Ninja Tune

Typically big on imagination and hoping to “joyfully connect people”, renowned Canadian DJ and producer Kid Koala puts his multifarious skills to good use on his new double album, ‘Creatures Of The Late Afternoon’ – with a built-in board game, to boot

WORDS: STEPHEN DALTON
PICTURES: CORINNE MERRELL

CREATURE FEATURE

When you first step into Kid Koala's krazy kartoon kosmos, the sheer range of his kaleidoscopic vision can be a little disorienting. The Canadian turntable maestro's roots may lie in the old skool hip hop skills of scratching, mixing and sampling, but his ever-expanding musical canvas encompasses deconstructed jazz and blues, funk and metal, experimental electronica and vintage Americana, cinematic scores and ambient soundscapes.

In a little over two decades, the restlessly inventive Montreal multimedia magpie – real name Eric San – has released nine solo albums, worked on dozens of collaborative projects and played with superstars like Beastie Boys, Gorillaz, Radiohead, Björk, Arcade Fire and Bryan Ferry. But music is only one aspect of his creative output, which includes graphic novels, films, board games, puppet operas and more. He may be just 48, but Kid Koala seems to inhabit an infinite multiverse of lives and careers. Everything everywhere all at once.

Even as he chats to me by video link from his Montreal studio base, Koala is bouncing around the room, pointing out his customised piano, his vintage Moog and Buchla synths, and his 1987 E-MU SP-1200 sampler and drum machine, as used by Lee "Scratch" Perry and countless other hip hop producers. He calls this set-up "cyborg", a mix of digital and analogue, but his signature aesthetic remains hand-crafted and lo-fi. He even has a vinyl cutter to create his own bespoke artisan dubplates for live performances.

Kid Koala's new album, 'Creatures Of The Late Afternoon', is an emphatically DIY affair. For the first time ever, he plays all 26 instruments across this musically eclectic double-length collection. This was more out of necessity than choice, since the album was largely recorded during Montreal's strict Covid lockdown, but he rose to the challenge with his usual infectiously childlike curiosity.

"I've got friends who can play all those instruments better than me," Koala explains. "This time it was just not an option. But I enjoyed the process and I had fun trying things out in the studio."

During the album's gestation, Koala drew inspiration from Peter Jackson's 2021 documentary series, 'The Beatles: Get Back', which led him to experiment with amps, mics and studio acoustics. Hardcore audio nerd stuff, in other words.

"Fully nerd," he laughs. "I mean, there was a lot of free time. Normally, I would spend half the year out on the road."

'Creatures Of The Late Afternoon' is Koala's most musically expansive, stylistically promiscuous album yet, from its artfully scuffed funk-rock grooves to its lavish Ennio Morricone homages, jaunty junk shop ska-punk jams and voluptuous retro-jazz chansons. The title has a vaguely 1950s sci-fi throwback feel, but it also ties into a larger meta-narrative about endangered species. It came to Koala while watching nature documentaries with his two teenage daughters during lockdown. The comforting animal antics often came with an apocalyptic twist.

"At the end of the more recent programmes, David Attenborough or somebody would always say, 'And now there are only seven of these left on the planet…'," he sighs. "You had this 30-minute escape from your lockdown, looking at these incredible creatures in nature, but it was always this downer ending, as some of them might be in the late afternoon of their existence. So the story became like, 'OK, what if they all played instruments and then they tried to protect their existence?'."

Reinforcing this backstory, 'Creatures Of The Late Afternoon' comes with its own board game. Plans are also well underway to turn it into a gloriously bizarre stage musical featuring puppets, live video screens, turntable and chamber orchestra. This will be Koala's third such collaboration with director KK Barrett and The Afiara String Quartet, following 'Nufonia Must Fall' and 'The Storyville Mosquito'.

"We're prototyping sets and puppets for it now," Koala says. "It's about a bunch of creatures that band together to try to save the Natural History Museum, told in action movie tropes."

This may sound like a grandiose late-career project, but Koala's output has been pan-dimensional from day one. His debut album, 'Carpal Tunnel Syndrome', an ambitiously hand-crafted analogue affair released in 2000, came with its own video game and 32-page comic book. Later releases have been accompanied by graphic novels, chess sets, cabaret-style stage shows, interactive 50-turntable live performances and more. Everything everywhere all at once.

Eric San was born in 1974 in Vancouver, the middle child of Chinese immigrant parents. His father worked as a cancer researcher and genetic toxicologist, his mother as an accountant. During their early courtship in the 1960s, his father left Hong Kong to study in Canada. The young lovers didn't see each other for seven years, but they wrote twice weekly. Indeed, one track on 'Creatures Of The Late Afternoon' – the retro-flavoured girl-group pastiche 'When U Say Love' – draws on their treasure trove of letters, which Koala found in a box stored in his studio space.

His father would also send his mother reel-to-reel tapes of Western pop hits taped off the radio, with the lyrics transcribed.

"That's how my mom actually learned to speak English," he recalls. "Listening to those songs, those pre-mix-tape mix tapes. She would read along and learn the songs and the words."

'When U Say Love' is not Koala's first musical tribute to his parents. After a pilgrimage to New Orleans in 2003 in homage to his jazz-loving father, he recorded a gloriously wonky scratch-jazz remix of the 1928 Spencer Williams Dixieland standard 'Basin Street Blues'. He went on to unveil a turntable deconstruction of the classic Henry Mancini/Johnny Mercer ballad, 'Moon River', one of his mother's most beloved songs, for her wedding anniversary party in Hawaii.

"I didn't think it would work in a nightclub setting, but the crowd was super into it," he says. "Then afterwards she said to me, 'Why'd you do that to my favourite song?'. Ha!"

Koala's musical education began at four with classical piano lessons. He hated them.

"It was a very strict conservatory training of music that was centuries old," he shrugs. "These days, I actually love classical music and it's kind of come full circle in terms of the stuff I'll practise on turntables. But when I was a kid, I just wanted to ride my bike and play with my friends. The piano was very adjudicated and competition-based – a bit stressful, to be honest. I didn't understand at the time how you could play a song written hundreds of years ago and do it with your own twist."

When he began scratching, mixing and DJing in his teens, it was "the opposite ethos" that fired his imagination. The reality-bending, time-stretching potential of the turntable opened up an infinite undiscovered universe of sonic invention.

"De La Soul, Coldcut, Public Enemy," he says, nodding. "Those three artists got played more than anything in my crate. I would deliver newspapers before school and have enough to buy maybe a couple of singles. The first 12-inch singles I got were by Public Enemy, and then I would have a whole week to learn every drop and rotation on the record. Same with De La Soul when '3 Feet High And Rising' came out – it opened the floodgates. 'What happens now? Anything is possible'. I still feel that about their work."

Alongside his early DJ efforts, Koala began drawing his own comic books, finding a crossover between two art forms that "live in the realm of the surreal". On TV, he also became obsessed with animal documentaries and puppet shows. When it came to choosing a college course and planning his dream career, he told his parents that he wanted to work on 'The Muppet Show' or 'Sesame Street'."My mom said, 'Just in case Jim Henson doesn't offer you a job, think of something like a fallback plan'," Koala laughs. "I said, maybe teaching school, because – especially at the elementary level – I remember having amazing teachers who were so exuberant. They turned everything into this wonderful adventure, no matter what the topic was. So that's what I studied in college. I was actually certified to teach kindergarten through sixth grade for a while."

By the time he completed his degree in early childhood education at Montreal's McGill University in 1996, Kid Koala was already established as a club DJ and nascent recording artist. When his debut mix tape, 'Scratchcratchratchatch', caught the ear of Coldcut's feted beats-and-bleeps label Ninja Tune, he became the first North American artist to join their roster.

In 1998, he was invited to collaborate by Beastie Boys sideman Money Mark. At the tender age of 23, he was opening for the superstar hip hop trio on their 'Hello Nasty' tour, sharing a stellar bill with A Tribe Called Quest. Koala expected a "crazy wild party" backstage, but instead found "super mellow" vibes.

"There were candles lit on the bus," he says. "Adam Yauch was reading a book about climbing Everest. And Mike D was trying to decide what kind of minivan to buy for the family."

Koala released his debut solo album, 'Carpal Tunnel Syndrome', in February 2000. That same year, he also began his fruitful, ongoing Deltron 3030 collaboration with producer Dan "The Automator" Nakamura and rapper Del Tha Funkee Homosapien.

When Nakamura began working with Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett on the first Gorillaz album, he invited Koala to scratch over the band's debut single, 'Clint Eastwood'. Soon afterwards, Koala was remixing Amon Tobin, opening for Björk and touring with Radiohead around the 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' period, playing live onstage with them at Madison Square Garden.

"Radiohead were so pleasant, so sweet and professional," he says. "What I learned is that even when people are operating at that massive level, they are still artists. Or at least I have been lucky to be touring with those types of bands. It was inspiring to see all these guys work super-hard, even though there's a staff of 1,000 people."

Kid Koala's krazy kartoon kosmos is a mostly sunny, surreal, family-friendly soft-play room populated by animals, insects and robots. But he also has his gnarly rock moments. In 2009, he joined US producer Dynomite D and Australian rockers Chris Ross and Myles Heskett, formerly of Wolfmother, to form the ferocious funk-metal combo The Slew. Billing their sound as "Public Enemy meets Black Sabbath", this combustible combo delivered wild live shows and a single long-player, '100%', with a sequel in long-term gestation.

"That was such a fun time," Koala recalls. "Mosh pits every night. I broke so many needles on tour. It was just amazing. We started recording some sessions with Chris and Myles, and we're in the process of trying to get everybody back together."

In 2014, working with KK Barrett and The Afiara String Quartet, Koala adapted his 2003 album 'Nufonia Must Fall' into a technically dazzling stage

production combining live puppetry, real-time video projection, turntables and a chamber orchestra. The same team followed this wildly ambitious show in 2019 with 'The Storyville Mosquito', a musical graphic novel staged in a similar manner.

Koala also released two ambient-adjacent torch-song albums under the umbrella title 'Music To Draw To' – 2017's 'Satellite', featuring Icelandic chanteuse Emilíana Torrini, and 'Io' two years later, showcasing Belgian singer Trixie Whitley. A third volume, with Canadian singer-songwriter Marlaena Moore, is currently in the pipeline.

The 'Music To Draw To' concept began around 2011. Koala was drafting his graphic novel about a female astronaut, 'Space Cadet', while spending long hours working alone in the depths of Montreal's brutal winter. To soften this lonely endeavour, he had the inspired idea of collaborative creative sessions. He rented out a small theatre on a Monday night and invited friends to come and be artistic, initially with a background mix tape of other people's music.

"I didn't know whether anyone would come," Koala says. "But 150 people showed up on the first night. By the third week, we had 600 people lining up with their portfolios and art supplies, waiting outside in sub-zero temperatures to come in and draw. Eventually, I started running out of records, so I began creating stuff live. And a lot of that became the skeletal versions of what ended up on 'Satellite'."

With the release of 'Creatures Of The Late Afternoon', the Koala agenda is even more hectic than usual. This year alone, he's booked to play solo gigs, collaborative performances with Deltron 3030 and LA-based punk-pop singer Leilani, and some more 'Storyville Mosquito' puppet shows. Meanwhile, he's currently working on his film directing debut, a 3D computer animation of his graphic novel 'Space Cadet'. A very Kid Koala schedule. Everything everywhere all at once.

You have to wonder where this boundless creative energy comes from.

"I'm definitely restless," he laughs. "You know what it is? I can focus on a project for years. I have many ideas, I can be patient, and I also actually just love learning stuff. The idea of having three years to work on a record – 'So what do you want to try? I want to try some stuff I've never done before'."

Maybe Kid Koala is living proof of the glib quote attributed to everyone from Confucius to Mark Twain, that if you find a job you love, you will never work a day in your life. The musical multiverse he has created from scratch, quite literally, looks insanely busy but endlessly enjoyable.

"I don't have much time off, but it's fun," he grins. "I don't consider it to be work if you're laughing this much all the time."

'Creatures Of The Late Afternoon' is out now on Envision

SECOND COMING

CREEP SHOW

Yawning Abyss

BELLA UNION

What do you get if you cross a soft-rock balladeer – albeit one who wholeheartedly embraces electronics – with some vintage synth nerds? If the union of John Grant with the Wrangler trio of Stephen Mallinder, Phill Winter and Ben "Benge" Edwards initially felt a little incongruous, the collective calling themselves Creep Show were apparently more than happy to play along. With Grant being a huge Mallinder/Cabaret Voltaire fan, there was certainly an element of inevitability about their collaboration. Having first met properly at Sheffield's Sensoria festival in 2014, something clicked, fun was had, and the four of them ended up performing as part of Rough Trade's 40th birthday celebrations in 2016.

"We don't really give a fuck how it goes down because it's just an excuse to spend some time together and get a lot of laughing done," Grant claimed around the release of their debut long-player 'Mr Dynamite', which scooped the Electronic Sound Album Of The Year gong in 2018.

But if Creep Show were having a laugh it seemed to be as much a coping mechanism as just four blokes dicking around. The squelchy analogue synth-funk and warped vocals of the tracks on 'Mr Dynamite' certainly raised a smile at times – even when Grant was recounting an unnerving childhood revenge fantasy on 'K Mart Johnny'. With hindsight, listening back to Creep Show's inaugural album following humanity's general downward trajectory over the past five years, it seems remarkably prescient. Whether or not Grant's sinister processed voice on the title track growling, "We're going to burn everything / In this motherfucker town tonight", was intended as a reference to Donald Trump in 2018, it now inescapably evokes the 45th President of the United States ranting away as his supporters stormed Capitol Hill. However, the moment that really makes you wonder whether the mysterious "crystal machine" Benge talks about using in the studio was actually a scrying ball rather than a synth comes on 'Modern Parenting' when Grant yelps, "But no one could suspect / The mother of all storms was brewing".

In the interim, following solo albums from Grant and Mallinder as well as Wrangler's 'A Situation' LP, Creep Show clearly decided that conditions – both personal and political – were right for them to join forces again, hence 'Yawning Abyss'. But the tone on this second offering is less dire warning than a dry-humoured, "We told you so". Encapsulated by the title track's central refrain: "Come sink with me / Into the yawning abyss / You'd have to be a crazy person / To assert you never wanted this", it's possibly the catchiest chorus about humanity's impending extinction since REM's 'It's The End Of The World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)'. The sugary synthpop backing helps the bitter medicine go down easily too, as bubbly as the cocktail you might sip beside a boiling irradiated ocean in a world where, as Grant puts it, "the autumn never came".

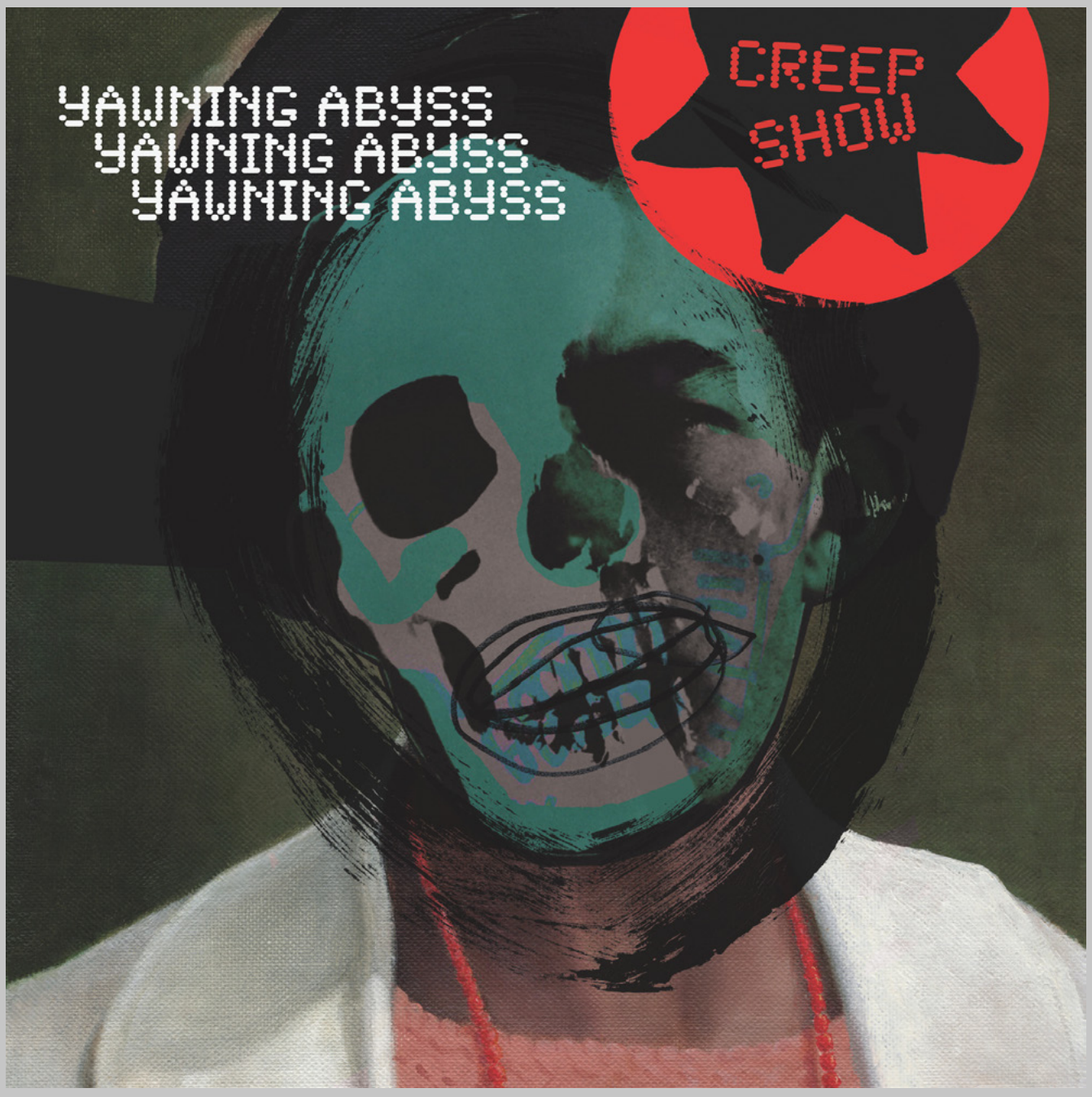
The fact that Creep Show have really tightened up their act for this second long-player means they manage to maintain a tricky balance between apocalyptic lyrics and accessible tunes throughout. Where tracks like 'Lime Ricky' from their debut would often stumble all over the shop, the arrangements on 'Yawning Abyss' are based on lithe grooves more than lurching beats – see the subtle funky bassline in 'Steak Diane', or the crisp electro of 'Yahtzee!', on which Grant sounds like a robotic preacher announcing the end of days at an early 1980s block party in the Bronx.

The vocals are clearer and less chaotic too, with Mallinder in particular stepping out from behind the curtain of vocal effects he employed on 'Mr Dynamite'. He brings the unmistakable snarl he honed as Cabaret Voltaire frontman to the fore on the sinuous electro-disco of 'Matinee', and also on 'Wise' – the closest thing to a straightforward techno track Creep Show have produced to date.

But it's 'Bungalow' that really demonstrates how far Creep Show have evolved. An electronic noir ballad about memories of teenage trauma in suburban Hollywood, complete with flourishes of synthetic harp, it's much closer to a Lana Del Rey song than the avant-industrial experiments of Mallinder's past.

If 'Bungalow' suggests the influence of David Lynch, the closing track also has an undeniable cinematic quality. An instrumental reprise of the chugging opener, 'The Bellows' – imagine a middle ground between 'Autobahn'-era Kraftwerk and Queen's 'Radio Ga Ga' – doom-laden lyrics such as "When the bombs are dropping", are replaced with elegiac synth lines, which feel like a chilling echo of a human voice in a landscape where people have long departed. It's the ideal backdrop for the end credits of mankind and the perfect conclusion to a record titled 'Yawning Abyss'. Somehow, Creep Show have made a second album that's even better than their first – let's just hope it's not even more prophetic.

PAUL CLARKE


YAWNING ABYSS
YAWNING ABYSS
YAWNING ABYSS
CREEP
SHOW

SQUID
O Monolith
WARP

These London/Brighton post-rock experimentalists really show their long-game chops here on their second album, expanding their potent sound in all directions with impressive verve. Moving forward from the uncompromising post-punk angularity of 'Bright Green Field', their acclaimed debut, 'O Monolith' instead steers a considered route wide of the pigeonholes. Spacious, exploratory numbers like 'Siphon Song' and the episodic standout 'The Blades' are electrifying, while on 'Devil's Den' they even filter pastoral British folk through their trademark prism of layered sonic invention and startling vision. Outstanding. **CG**

SCENIUS
Life Is A Thing
BANDCAMP

This Anglo-French duo's second album has all of the hallmarks of richly melodramatic synthpop underpinned with the moody energy of modern gothic electro. Cascading synths, filtered basslines and snapping drum machines flirt with impassioned vocals in a future-past dance empowered by powerful production. Nostalgic, perhaps, but on tracks like 'La Même Nuit', 'Escalation' and 'Chinese Room' it becomes clear just why Scenius are a growing force in the global synthpop underground. **MJ**

CHOCOLATE HILLS
Yarns From The Chocolate Triangle
ORBSCURE

The latest Orb album is their most mainstream yet, and their best for a long time. But lovers of the more esoteric side of Alex Paterson's output will easily slip into this third long-player from his project with Metamono's Paul Conboy. Loosely based around a trip in and out of the Bermuda Triangle, it's a gentle and meandering voyage that will be familiar to fans of The Orb. Though tracks like the otherworldly sea shanty, 'Compass I Fell In Love', are typical of a sample palette incorporating violins, pianos and Spanish guitars floating among those trademark cosmic clouds. **BW**

KY
Power Is The Pharmacy
CONSTELLATION

Ky Brooks, best-known as the singer and lyricist of noise trio Lungbutter, is diversifying on 'Power Is The Pharmacy', an indirect take on avant-garde electronic music. These nine vignettes from the Montreal scene offer a patchwork of thought-provoking songs and spoken word here, often exploring the paradox of repetition, as on 'Work That Superficially Looks Like Leisure'. There's an agitprop undercurrent, challenging the systems that enslave us, though Brooks transcends mere political posturing with dazzling imagery and genuine originality on tracks like 'The Dancer'. **JA**

KAUKOLAMPI

KAUKOLAMPI
Inside The Sphere
OPTIMO MUSIC

Timo Kaukolampi fronts Finnish electro-psych outfit K-X-P, but his second solo outing hums with exquisitely rendered, cerebral and dark-shaded electronics, evoking the paranoid Cold War feeling of acts like Pye Corner Audio or Not Waving. Partly influenced by a brush with one of life's bad people, Kaukolampi channelled the event into a concept based around "the sphere" and its "dome of undue influence". By turns adrenalised, hypnotic and sparse, tracks like the miasmic 'Ee-Nni-Aa-Ssa' combine the ancient textures of devotional choral music with a nuanced sense of dystopian foreboding, and come highly recommended. **CG**

M SAGE
Paradise Crick
RVNG INTL

A new one from Colorado's Matthew Sage, whose work inhabits an intersection between abstraction and fantasy – as do the pieces here. The "crick" in this particular landscape ripples with a kind of queasy magic that shimmers in the foreground. 'Bendin' In' approaches slightly askew, its bleeps and bloops appearing somehow static and full of movement, while 'Crick Foam' conjures indistinct nature sounds from a bank of slow-swell radiation. It's a strange kind of paradise, but a pleasure to explore. **ST**

MUN SING
Inflatable Gravestone
PLANET MU

Renowned for heavy industrial techno as half of Giant Swan, Bristolian artist Harry Wright's debut solo album as Mun Sing reveals a hitherto unsuspected absurdist humour and lightness of touch. Something made even more surprising by the fact that 'Inflatable Gravestone' was inspired by the death of Wright's father. Singer MX World's vocals cast a melancholy pall over 'The Poison Garden', but rubbery rhythms and samples of manic laughter elsewhere convey the whirlpools of conflicting emotions stirred up by grief just as well. **PC**

DADDY SQUAD
All Day All Night Automatic
AAA BATTERY

The debut solo album of former Monarchy man Andrew Armstrong absolutely reeks of poppers and cramped sweaty clubs. Far more dancefloor-oriented than his previous outfit, this flits between Italo disco and vocoder-assisted electroclash (on the title track) to 1980s hi-NRG (the Yazoo-purloining 'We're So Lovely'). It threatens at times to topple over into outright cheese, but mostly Armstrong keeps the ironic campery reined in. Buff, butch and with a beaming (and slightly knowing) grin, it's all but irresistible. **WS**

RẮN CẠP ĐUÔI COLLECTIVE

RẮN CẠP ĐUÔI COLLECTIVE

***1**

NHẠC GÃY

This vibrant release from Vietnam's Rắn Cạp Đuôi Collective is a tour-de-force in sound. Cast your expectations aside and let yourself be carried, as it's a rare moment on '*1' when you can predict what comes next. From the coruscating ambient harmonies of 'What Cherubs', which swiftly dive into hammering rhythmic noise, to the post-rock-esque electric blast of 'Pressure', Rắn Cạp Đuôi Collective assert their ingenuity all over. This is the sound of them beckoning us toward something astonishing and imaginative. Don't miss the boat. **FH**

THE EXALTICS

The Seventh Planet

CLONE WEST COAST SERIES

Rob Witschakowski (aka The Exaltics) is a giant of modern electro with an unmistakably menacing and compelling style. Albums are his specialty, and 'The Seventh Planet' is his 10th solo effort. It's a record that exudes sci-fi atmosphere and drum machine grit. 'Lif Eono Ther Planets' pits dystopian spoken word from Paris The Black Fu against remorseless synth bass riffs, while 'Resurface' nods to Detroit techno with its jazzy chords and low-end groove. Another masterclass. **BM**

WATA IGARASHI

Agartha

KOMPAKT

Apparently Japanese techno producer Wata Igarashi's debut album is designed to soundtrack a mythical kingdom comprising "a complex maze of underground tunnels". Which makes it sound a bit like London's Bank tube station. 'Agartha' is much more enjoyable to get lost in, though. Burrowing beyond the dancefloor 12-inch records he's released on labels such as Delsin, 'Agartha' is a suitably labyrinthine listen, with the Cluster-like kosmische of 'Floating Against Time' and the galactic cinerama of 'Eternally' among the heights he scales on his journey. **PC**

DANIEL BLUMBERG

GUT

MUTE

'GUT' is seasoned improviser Daniel Blumberg's third solo album for Mute, and finds him focused on his stomach as the source of various anxieties and physical health issues. The retching and howling on 'BODY' aside, the collection finds Blumberg in a soulful mood. 'CHEERUP' is dominated by plaintive piano and bass harmonica, paired with the angelic, honest lyric, "Nothing ever changes in this world". 'HOLDBACK' is still and haunting, with a vocal lamenting nervousness over quiet synths. A stunning, honest and unflinching body of work. **MS**

JAYDA G - PHOTO: NABIL ELDERKIN

JAYDA G
Guy
NINJA TUNE

The Canadian artist's second album for Ninja Tune is a deeply personal project. Here, Jayda G has unearthed recordings made by her late father before his premature death and woven these into songs inspired by his life story. At times you feel like you're intruding on a private therapy session, albeit one with a sprightly and easily digestible soundtrack. The dark lyrics on 'Scars' and 'Meant To Be' are offset by the music – funky house and electronic soul – which slips down so smoothly. 'Guy' works on every level. Her dad would have been proud. **WS**

PEL MEL
Late, Late Show
EFFICIENT SPACE

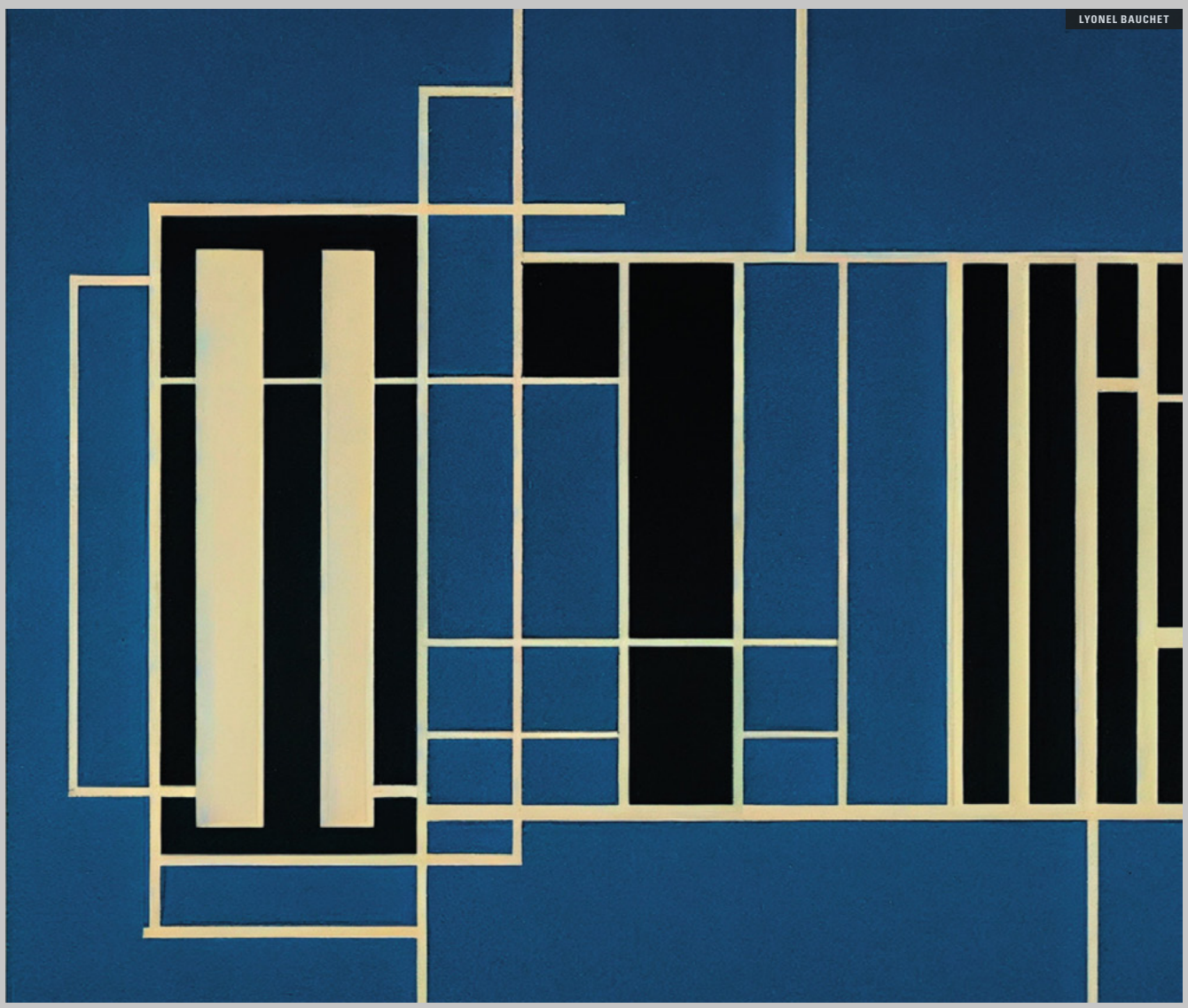
A late, late showing for 'Late, Late Show'. Originally recorded in the mid-1980s, Efficient Space have finally released this set of tracks from Australia's Pel Mel. Compared with their earlier work, these pieces are pared back and raw, stripped to their melodic bones. 'Love On A Funeral Pyre' bounces and clacks across spare 80s electronics, like The Flowerpot Men's 'Beat City' covered by Young Marble Giants. The high point is the title track, Judy McGee's vocal reverberating across nocturnal Heaven 17-like synths. **ST**

DIBIDIM
Superheaven
SNORKEL

Snorkel Records loved Norwegian duo Dibidim's 2006 self-released debut album so much they re-issued it in 2019. 'Superheaven' follows in its wake, and is every bit as relaxed and self-assured as the album's laid-back cover, featuring Dibidim relaxing in an outdoor pool. The title track is ether-like, with layered vocals reminiscent of Tame Impala at their most celestial, while 'Easy Lee' mixes up late Beatles, Beach Boys and Floyd influences to whisk you well back into the 20th century. 'Dub Maritime', meanwhile, is a slick funk affair, and an obvious highlight. Yacht dance, anyone? **BW**

PERE UBU
Trouble On Big Beat Street
CHERRY RED

Cleveland's Pere Ubu are legendary punks who experimented with synthesisers and musique concrète in the mid-1970s, have a frontman called Crocus Behemoth (David Thomas) and take their name from the weirdest play of the fin-de-siècle. This ease with the cultivated and common means they can perform a theremin-inflected incantation called 'Satan's Hamster' on 'Trouble On Big Beat Street' just as easily as a cover of The Osmonds' 'Crazy Horses'.Their 19th studio album is a big, bluesy hullabaloo, and a boon too, as it seems 2019's 'The Long Goodbye' was just an au revoir. **JA**



LYONEL BAUCHET
Tractatus Lyra-Organismus
DiN

Apparently, this film composer's third album for DiN is inspired by Wittgenstein – the track titles having been swiped from the French translation of the seven main maxims in one of his works. But you don't need A-Level Philosophy to appreciate this seven-part soundscape, crafted largely from his Soma analogue synth. Bauchet adds tender percussion, creeping orchestral textures, and on tracks like 'Une Seule Et Même Réalité' and 'L'Ordre À Priori Des Choses', just a little treated piano. It's a pleasure to find yourself adrift on this lulling vessel as it navigates strangely exotic terrain. **WS**

CROATIAN AMOR
A Part Of You In Everything
POSH ISOLATION

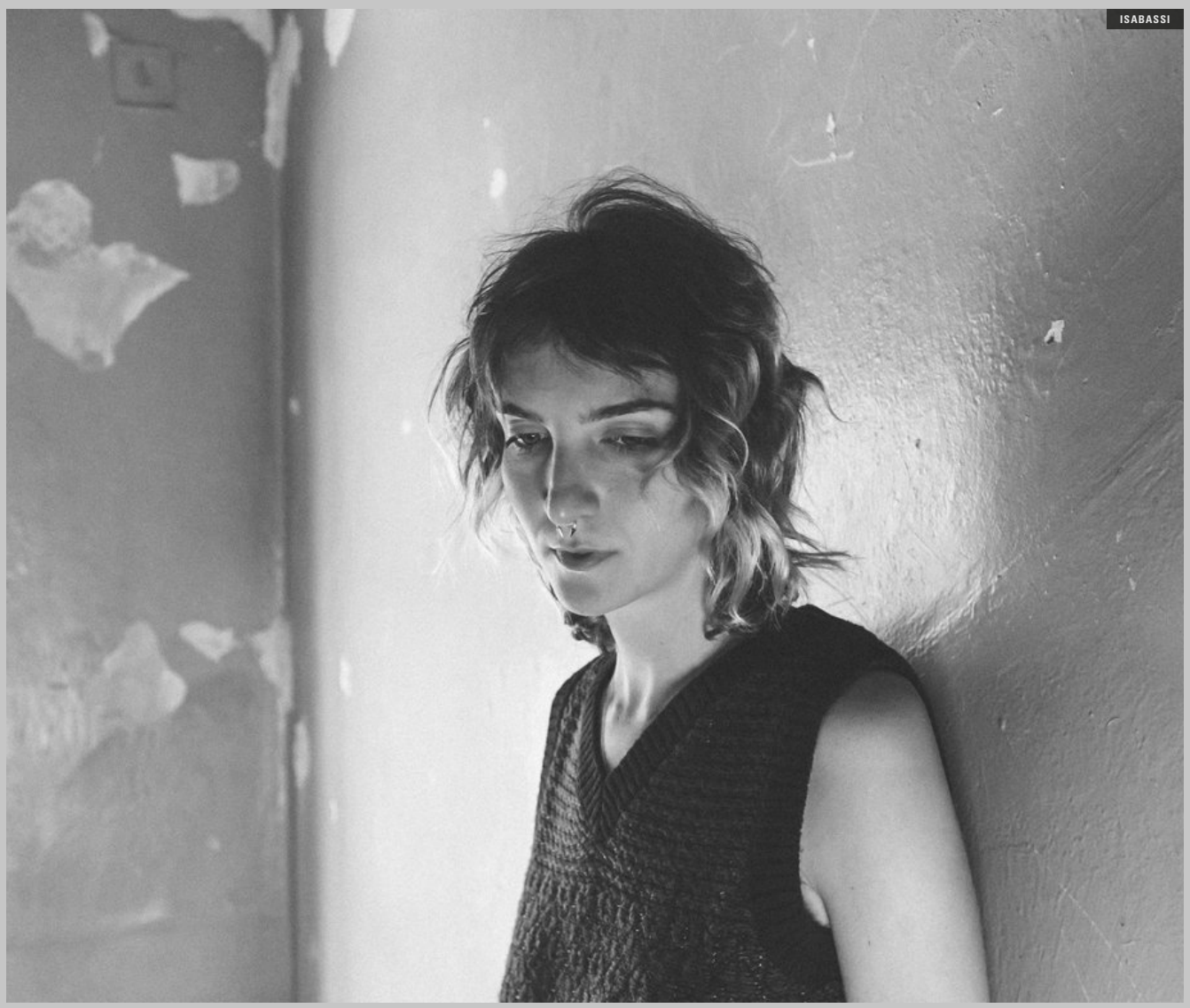
Croatian Amor's younger brother died at birth, and the lost sibling became a "ghost friend" while he was growing up, returning when the Danish producer was about to become a father. This touching work was created in his brother's honour. Grainy samples, glitches and dislocated voices jostle gently with optimistic, almost Day-Glo synth lines. The Vangelis-slanted 'Kites (A Part Of You In Everything)', coasting low-key groover 'Tulip Coupon' (featuring Perko), and gently arpeggiating 'All Angels Meet Again' with NikkiH2OP are worthy of special mentions, but the whole album is a real treat. **BW**

ZYLVA
Poems From The Dark
SQUAMA

German classical musician turned electronic producer Zylva fuses these two seemingly incompatible strands into an accomplished debut album informed by heartbreak and mental health challenges. The best moments here arrive when Zylva switches off the Auto-Tune effect that characterises some songs – 'Dolphins & Roses' is a reflective, introspective piece where delicate synths rest atop plaintive piano, while 'Echoes From A Theatre' is inchoate and distant, her vocals delivered with a moving honesty. Beautiful, emotionally raw music for broken hearts. **MS**

JFDR
Museum
HOUNDSTOOTH

There's a world-weariness to the music of Iceland's Jófríður Ákadóttir, aka JFDR, whose solo vehicle has won her the praise of fellow Icelander and the queen herself, Björk. For 'Museum', Ákadóttir went through various musical sketches on her hard drive from five years ago and chanced on this material. These are fragile, intimate songs that sparkle in the frozen sunshine like gossamer snowflakes, with a mixture of harmonic guitars and subtle electronica on tracks like 'Life Man'. Things are most interesting when everything folds in on itself sonically, as is the case on 'Sideways Moon'. **JA**


ISABASSI

ISABASSI
Speaking Things
SUPER HEXAGON

Brazilian musician Isabassi's debut long-player is the reinvention of industrial music you've been waiting for. Devoid of any ineffective, overworked stylistics you may associate with the term, Isabassi's take on industrial is extremely textured, dizzyingly deep in the low end, and compellingly inventive. 'Escapist Foley' takes more from the world of sound art than underlit clubs, while 'Mesclado' rips massive tokes from experimental dub, twisting excavated sounds into thundering steps. A newcomer full of vast potential. **FH**

GRAHAM LAMBKIN
Aphorisms
BLANK FORMS EDITIONS

What lends Graham Lambkin's work its depth of impact is the stark evidence of his own hand – the microtonal trail of a finger lingering on a piano key, or incidental sonic detritus, such as paper rustled in the background. On 'Aphorisms', these fingerprints are at their most pronounced, resulting in Lambkin's most provocative since the early Shadow Ring releases. 'Samplehurst' disorganises piano snippets into atonal but strangely moving sequence, while 'Needlemuff' threads sporadic string twang through open air and disconnected household clatter, registering like a more English Jandek. **ST**

BRUTALIST ARCHITECTURE IN THE SUN
Loneliness Kills
BANDCAMP

The sixth album by Thames Estuary-area duo (Dean Clarke and Cye Thomas) finds them at the junction of analogue electronic post-punk, emo synthpop and brittle coldwave, deep in the darkness of what they describe as "grief-tronica". The snapping snares and snarling ambience of 'Grief Killed Hope' and the suffocating echo drop synths of 'Desolation Street' certainly have a certain bleakness, but their infectious pop tones continue to rise to the surface. **MJ**

FOSTER NEVILLE
The Edge Of Destruction
SUBEXOTIC

Durham-dweller Neville seems an eccentric cove. He is, we are told, chairman of the Society For Italic Handwriting. Or should that be the *Society For Italic Handwriting*? He approaches this splendid ambient album from a similarly curious angle, citing the mathematical philosophies of Matila Ghyka and the architecture of Le Corbusier as influences. But, as befits an album named after a 1964 'Doctor Who' story, it's the spirit of the Radiophonic Workshop that pervades, with 'Wenlock Clouds', 'Hookland' and the 10-minute title track all exuding an air of disquieting vintage weirdness. **BF**

SVETLANA MARAŠ

SVETLANA MARAŠ
Live Performance 2019-2020
-OUS

Recorded at Il Circolo Del Frattempo in Zurich, this record captures the guile and agility of Serbian musician Svetlana Maraš, who describes her live work as an attempt to emphasise "the sculptural and improvisational potential, rather than reproducibility". These pieces feel about as reproducible as a snowflake, their multiple planes and textures colliding in wholly unpredictable ways. The opener '2019-2020-1' sees scuttling electronics move beneath distant sirens. When the suite closes with '2019-2020-8', the sounds have waxed into chaotic towers dressed in backwards garble and thrillingly cavernous echoes. **ST**

YA TOSIBA
ASAP Inşallah
HUGE BASS

Azerbaijani-Finnish duo Tatu Metsätähti and Zuzu Zakaria throw absolutely everything into the mix on their second album, starting with analogue electronics then layering in Turkish psychedelics, Scandinavian funk, Caucasus synthpop and folkloric music. Some of the lengthier psych wig-outs get lost chasing their own tails, but when 'ASAP Inşallah' is good, it's very good. 'Yarə Məni' is folk-meets-industrial with fried bass synths, 'Xudayar Təsnifi' is velvety disco carried by Zakaria's magnetic vocals, and 'Bu Pişik' works up a brew of sultry and surprising reggaeton-rap. Hugely addictive. **CF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Музыкальное Приношение (Musical Offering)
COLD SPRING

First recorded in 1971, this excellent album features five key Soviet composers – Oleg Buloshkin, Sofia Gubaidulina, Eduard Artemyev, Edison Denisov and Alfred Schnittke – each performing their work on a "photoelectronic" (light-controlled) ANS synth. Best-known for his landmark electronic score to Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 sci-fi masterpiece, 'Solaris', Artemyev's all-enveloping 'Twelve Looks At The World Of Sound' is unequivocally chilling, like being sucked into a sonic black hole. Gubaidulina's 'Vivente-Non Vivente' is equally potent, a dramatic suite of Radiophonic Workshop-style incidentals. Immense. **VI**

KUTIMAN
Dense
SIYAL MUSIC

Probably best-known for his YouTube antics – his innovative 'Thru The City' clip, blending countless videos into one track, has been watched over two million times – Kutiman, who's from Tel Aviv, has made plenty of his own music too. Here, he crafts six gorgeously noir examples of modern experimental soul inspired by dark personal times and the music of Burial and Rhythm & Sound. Eerie is the watchword then, from the disembodied vocals of 'Sun Don't Shine' and the minimal lilt of 'Darkness In My Light' to the sparse dancefloor grooves of 'Nothing On My Mind'. Slick. **BW**

JIM

Love Makes Magic

VICIOUS CHARM

If Crosby, Stills & Nash, The Isley Brothers and Michael McDonald made a record together, it might sound like this. JIM is Nottingham's Jim Baron, of electronic disco outfit Crazy P, and 'Love Makes Magic' is a Balearic-folk tribute to another side of his musical taste. 'Across The Street' casts a spell of 1970s acoustic bliss, and the single 'Still River Flow' stomps along on feel-good piano, guitar picking and funk bass, with lyrics to melt the sternest heart. **BM**

BENEFITS

Nails

INVADA

"Formulate your own ideas, don't get bullied by hate speech / Ignore cartoon fascists, REJECT HATE." The opening salvo of 'Marlboro Hundreds' epitomises an album of furious noise, with frontman Kingsley Hall – once of Teesside goth-punks The Chapman Family – eviscerating the carcass of a country on the bones of its arse. There are lighter touches, though. 'Shit Britain' is witty trip hop ("You're Churchillian if you're posh and mumble") and 'Council Rust' a sliver of ambient positivity. Its own grimly determined statement of intent? "To never let the bastards win." Beautifully brutal. **BF**

A PRODUCE

The Clearing (Expanded Edition)

INDEPENDENT PROJECT

A Produce was the moniker of the late Barry Craig, a guitarist and producer from LA who was once a member of the cult group Afterimage. Craig quietly released his debut solo LP 'The Clearing' in 1988, and with any luck the expanded reissue will finally bring this ethereal, richly layered album the attention it deserves. 'Ashes Of Love ' and 'Raga Riley' are two pertinent, if contrasting, highlights. The former a plaintive slice of post-punk, the latter a spellbinding swirl of organs and electronics that pays homage to the great Terry Riley. **IB**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Luke Una Presents É Soul Cultura Vol 2

MR BONGO

What a box of delights Manchester DJ Luke Una presents us with here. Not since Gilles Peterson and his groundbreaking 'Worldwide' series has anyone moved through time, tempos, genres and continents with such culturally savvy, floorfilling aplomb. The very essence of global eclecticism, this second volume is a little more soulfully experimental than previous material. Una serves us with beauties like LFO's long-forgotten, half speed head-nodder 'Shove Piggy Shove', or obscure Japanese act The Bach Revolution's delightful proto-electro chugger 'DE108' from 1979. Unmissable. **CG**

FILA BRAZILLIA

Retrospective Redux 90 – 22

RE:WARM

From the twisted Balearic ambience of their earliest output to the rock-meets-outre-dub funk of their later live band, Fila Brazillia always forged their own inimitable genre path. Formed in Hull in 1990 by Steve Cobby and David McSherry, the duo's sound has shapeshifted through different periods across the years, before they called time in 2006 with the release of their original 'Retrospective' compilation. Here, the updated collection neatly revisits highlights from their career, and adds two previously digital-only tracks plus the Latin powerhouse of exclusive new composition 'Toro De Fuego'.

Compiled chronologically, this set tells the story of a pair who took huge pride in never quite fitting in. Take 'The Sherriff' with its slightly too funky Balearic grooves, or 'Little Dipper' with a flute-driven propulsive jazz that's just a touch too silly, or 'Bumblehaun', a track that's having too much of a good time for its 1970s cop show vibe. Or indeed the horror funk of 'Madame Le Fevre', taking slap bass to places it's never been before. Uniquely Fila. **MJ**

KILLING JOKE

In Dub Rewind Vol 2

KILLING JOKE MUSIC / CADIZ MUSIC

Having formed in Notting Hill in 1978, post-punk titans Killing Joke have always had a profound relationship with dub. It made perfect sense then that they released 2021's 'Rewind Vol 1' – a kind of rewired greatest hits with tracks like 'Requiem' and 'Love Like Blood' given a dub makeover by superproducer Youth, who also handily doubles up as the band's bassist. Quick on its heels comes 'Vol 2', with 10 further deconstructions of deeper cuts from their back catalogue.

The songs selected here invariably have a heavier groove – or at least the original tracks do. 'The Death & Resurrection Show' from 2003's brilliant second self-titled album gets two reworkings, and the live favourite 'Pssyche', which started life as the B-side to 1980's 'Wardance', also receives a pair of visits. Perhaps best of all though is the "Berlin Hacker Dub" reinvention of 'Autonomous Zone' from 2015's 'Pylon'. An apocalyptic paranoia seeps out of every pore of that album, but brought to heel and made to tread languorously under the influence of dub, 'Autonomous Zone' is infused with a more appropriate, less high-octane, stoner vibe that really suits it. **JA**

TWOONKY

Ottico

MACADAM MAMBO

Twoonky is the duo of Italian brothers Simone and Michele Bornati, and 'Ottico' ups the oddness of their debut 'Dezzo'. Odd, but completely engaging – the burble and bloop of 'Dream Is Impossible' would work beautifully on any Wes Anderson film soundtrack, while 'Coffee Spartan' sounds like 'Stella'-era Yello if that album had been recorded in a bright marble bathroom.

As 'Ottico' progresses, the pieces tend more towards the weirdness of the latter, and these moments of monstrous voices and dismembered pratfall sonics are where the duo are at their most compelling. 'Enciclopedico' submerges a television documentary-style narrative sample in hot tape warble before the unexpected growl of animals and screech of chasing cars enter the scene, while 'Christmas' sounds like eight kids intermittently pressing the demo button on the Casio keyboard brought to them by Santa Claus. It's weird and shouldn't make sense, but it does – brilliantly – finding a wonderful intersection between 2D cartoon crudeness and oddly noirish 3D textures. **ST**

BRANDT BRAUER FRICK - PHOTO: LIONEL MACOR

BRANDT BRAUER FRICK

Multi Faith Prayer Room

BECAUSE MUSIC

'Multi Faith Prayer Room' is an apt title for a Brandt Brauer Frick album, given that the German trio's music has always been a broad church. They've previously collaborated with artists as diverse as Gudrun Gut and Nina Kraviz and performed with 90-piece orchestras– not to mention Paul Frick's side hustle as a member of Tangerine Dream.

For their sixth album, they sent questionnaires to 500 people asking for predictions for the future, and the responses form interludes between tracks like 'Dotted Line' and 'Perpetuate', which are full of the familiar cut-up acoustic instruments and stuttering techno from albums like 2011's 'Mr. Machine'. However, 'Closer To You' and 'This Feeling', featuring vocalists Duane Harden and Sophie Hunger, have a poppier feel than before, while Mykki Blanco intertwines fears about the climate crisis with paeans to the joys of threesomes on 'Act One'. Brandt Brauer Frick know that more really is merrier, after all. **PC**

TAROTPLANE

39.28°N 76.62°W

WOODFORD HALSE

In case you were wondering, it's in Baltimore. The home of ambient wizard Tarotplane, although this immersive album takes lengthy detours to Lancashire, combining mellifluous psychedelic guitar stylings with the modular pulses of two distinctly British knob-twiddlers. There are two 20-minute suites, with the opening '53.77°N 2.70°W' (we'll save you the effort again – it's in Preston) slowly sliding into the gently hypnotic grooves of moustachioed maestro Stephen "Polypores" Buckley. It's a soothing, sun-soaked paddle… until patters of Santana-esque noodles emerge from a gathering mist of somewhat darker ambience.

Mark "Field Lines Cartographer" Burford slips into the hot seat for '54.05°N 2.79°W'. And yes, it's in Lancaster. Here, gentle waves lap on the shore of a dreamstate that feels more abstract, more elusive. Spiralling guitars escort ghostly, half-heard voices to the brink of an increasingly grouchy-looking skyline. It's the perfect finale to a strange, summer afternoon of an album. Now, everyone down to 54.07°N 2.87°W for a pint of mild and a bag of chips? **BF**

AR KANE

AR Kive

ROCKET GIRL

'AR Kive' is a beefy reissue package revisiting the first three major releases from Alex Ayuli and Rudi Tambala's AR Kane guise. It begins in 1988 with their 'Up Home' EP and debut album '69', which saw them coin the term "dreampop" – shorthand for the duo's magnificent mix of spectral indie guitar thrumming, dub stodginess, and deliciously unidentifiable celestial slush.

Punctuated by lyrics that didn't know if they were pop hooks or mantras, a new remastering from Tambala has made these tracks glisten more than ever, from the hypnotic 'Crazy Blue' to the shuddering 'Baby Milk Snatcher'. Just a year later, AR would blossom in other unpredictable ways with 'i', their second LP. For all its digitised and dancier attitudes on totemic tunes like 'A Love From Outer Space' and 'Crack Up', the 25-track album arrives glued together with snippets of found sound, teetering gorgeously between clubby alt-anthems and art school collage. It tops off this 'AR KIVE', which confirms that AR Kane have as much blissful oomph as they did three decades ago. **ILS**

KRISTEN ROOS

KRISTEN ROOS
Universal Synthesizer Interface Vol II
WE ARE BUSY BODIES

Music-making software is sophisticated today, but it wasn't always this way. Vancouver composer Kristen Roos' work is made with some of the first MIDI music software programs, an idea he stumbled on after finding a floppy disk of Laurie Spiegel's pioneering, 1985-released Music Mouse on eBay. On 'Universal Synthesizer Interface Vol II', he employs both that software and Frank Balde's 'Diablo', shaping their basic loops and patterns into latticed layers of sound. In the process, he uncovers their little-heard complexity and beauty.

'Diablo II' has darting marimba-like rhythms and tinkling synths that overlap and create pleasing harmonies, while the bewitching 'Music Mouse II' has bassy FM tones that weave into a metallic patchwork, building into a towering edifice of synth. There are hints of Steve Reich, Terry Riley and even minimal techno here, but Roos' sound world is his own. A feat of combining dusty technology with modern smarts. **BM**

SPARKS
The Girl Is Crying In Her Latte
ISLAND

Ron and Russell Mael make light work of that difficult 25th album. Insidious pop melodies? Check. Soaring, dandyish vocals from the younger Mael? Check. Offbeam lyrical concerns from his older brother, a man who has always taken that "sideways look at the world" ethos disarmingly literally? Hell, yeah. Although the opening title track adds a streak of wistfulness that lingers throughout. "So many people are crying in their latte," chants Russell on this infectious exercise in minimalist melancholy.

So 'Veronica Lake' and 'We Go Dancing' pay homage, respectively, to the peekaboo hairstyle of America's wartime sweetheart and the synchronised frugs of the North Korean military. But elsewhere, the Maels seem endearingly world-weary… never more so than on the glorious 'Nothing Is As Good As They Say It Is'. An absolute thumper, the equal of anything in their canon, it has guitars that go whoomph, synths that go plink and a lyric of perfect, studied cynicism – "I was born just 22 hours ago / But I want to go back to my former quarters". Midlife misery has never sounded so life-affirming. **BF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Arlo's Sounds Of Norfolk
WAXING CRESCENT

'Arlo's Sounds Of Norfolk' is an audio travelogue as heard by Arlo, the eight-year-old son of Neil Stringfellow (Audio Obscura). Arlo recorded six sounds for a school project in places like Cromer, Sheringham and Norwich, which were then handed to 10 electronic artists who responded freely to his recordings.

Ossa's 'Spixwork TapeLoop' features an ethereal, haunting melody that underpins joyful gasps at fireworks on bonfire night. Along with Veins Full Of Static's 'Some Kind Of Communion' and Pulselovers' 'Leisureland', which also use ephemeral and fragile textures, these pieces carry a sense of longing and yearning, reflecting how fleeting moments endure far longer in our memories.

The real star of the album is undoubtedly Arlo, whose original recordings are included after the 10 tracks. Whereas seasoned field recording artists seek out the unusual and unheard, Arlo captures the quotidian and personal, like picnic conversations between him and his parents, ultimately making this an innocent journey through the eyes (and ears) of youthfulness. **MS**

RICHARD SEN

Dream The Dream: UK Techno, House And Breakbeat 1990-1994

DANCE MUSIC FROM PLANET EARTH

Early 90s dance cross-section

Once the preserve of bargain bins, the forgotten vinyl relics of early 1990s techno and electronica have become the Holy Grail of a new generation. Some of the most obscure gems of the era now fetch eye-watering prices on Discogs, while collectors and DJs dig deeper, hoping to uncover something unknown and brilliant.

A former graffiti artist, Richard Sen began DJing in 1989, amassing a vast collection of records and playing raves, festivals and clubs around the UK and mainland Europe as the 90s unfolded. He experienced the epoch first-hand, trawling its now-shuttered record shops like Silverfish and Fat Cat. 'Dream The Dream' represents his memories of the time, bringing together various dance genres and tantalising obscurities.

Over the course of the collection's 10 tracks, you can taste the distinct flavour of the decade. House collides with ambient, breakbeat overlaps with techno, and Belgian new beat combines with trance to create weird and wonderful composites. There's a DIY energy, a gleeful cut-and-paste feel, and a seditious joy that runs through these tunes. Orr-Some's 'We Can Make It' is an immediate highlight, with its Korg M1 piano prods, rolling breaks, cheeky horn blasts and devastating rhino of a bassline, while the unsettling sparseness of Biff'um Baff'um Boys' 'Bombing' was clearly designed for playing at raves, with its air-raid sirens, spooky synths and Renegade Soundwave-ish rhythm.

By contrast, Centuras' 'Tokyo' is a serene ambient techno gem, with its waves of synth, rainforest aura and vocal snippets, and Mind Over Rhythm's 'Kubital Footstorm (Global Beatmix)' has spoken word vocals and a bustle of live percussion, its eerie riffs and hypnotic, arpeggiated bassline putting it in the realm of early trance. The only track here I knew already was Dream Frequency's 'Dream The Dream', a lethal dose of rave-inflected house that has aged particularly well.

There's a flood of these 1990s obscurity compilations out there right now, but Richard Sen's selection is especially good – presenting a cross-section of this wildly creative time and offering up tracks that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive. Respect.

BEN MURPHY

HOLY TONGUE

Deliverance And Spiritual Warfare

AMIDAH

Live and heady dub experiments

The best drummer in the business right now? My money's on Valentina Magaletti. From muscular motorik rhythms to skittering avant-garde beats, the Italian musician is a percussive powerhouse. Magaletti's shapeshifting style is particularly at home amid hybrid electronic projects – she's a member of Vanishing Twin, Tomaga and Moin, and has also collaborated with the likes of Lafawndah, Nicolas Jaar and Jandek. As timekeeper (and co-composer) for Holy Tongue, she brings a hypnotic and human edge to this debut album of heady experimental dub.

Formed in 2018 by Magaletti and British producer/musician Al Wootton (aka Deadboy), Holy Tongue released a trilogy of acclaimed EPs between 2020 and 2022. Tracks from across these three records – like the freewheeling 'Emet' or cosmic roller 'Between The Vessel And The Light' – show just how expertly they craft enveloping caverns of sound. Think Liquid Liquid and ESG, and Bill Laswell and Style Scott's 1997 album 'Dub Meltdown', with lashings of improvisational jazz, murky techno and the defiant attitude of post-punk.

On 'Deliverance And Spiritual Warfare' they've tweaked the formula with the addition of bass player Susumu Mukai. In between Magaletti's studied rolls and rattles, Wootton's psychedelic-tinted electronics and Mukai's heavyweight bass, the mood flits between light and dark. As the album title suggests, it's as though there's an existential tussle going on.

Take the lean and mean 'Threshing Floor', with its ominous low frequencies that indeed feel like something being trampled underfoot, coupled with uneasy, squalling synth lines. Or the imposing 'Under A Veil, Under A Garment', where the claustrophobic rhythm eventually shatters into a climax of metallic guitar sounds and sawing distortion. That's the "spiritual warfare" bit, then.

Deliverance comes in the form of the album's jazz-steeped moments, with guest musicians Abraham Parker and David Wootton on brass and improv virtuoso Steve Beresford on prepared piano. 'Saeta' announces itself with dramatic Morricone-esque fanfare before sliding into a bullet-spraying battle of electronics. The quirky 'Susuro' is bubbly and polyrhythmic, while 'Joachim' is the most straightforward jazz composition here, pairing a fret-walking bassline with exploratory piano notes.

By the closing track, 'I Am Here In A Place Beyond Desire Or Fear', the keys have faded away into a cleansing, languid haze of trumpets, slow-motion percussion and echoing, swirling effects. From start to finish, Holy Tongue's journey to spiritual liberation is a gloriously mind-melting trip.

CLAIRE FRANCIS

Buried Treasure

AMANDA LEAR

Sweet Revenge

ARIOLA, 1978

Amanda Lear's 'Sweet Revenge' sold remarkably well on the continent when eurodisco was in its infancy in 1978, even if it made little headway in the UK. Lear penned the lyrics on the Moog-y disco concept album (recorded with the German Schlager singer-turned-producer Tony Monn), loosely based on the Faust legend and presented as a burlesque musical fantasia. There's a lot to commend it, namely the decadently camp disco banger 'Follow Me', and 'Gold', which bears a striking resemblance to Sparks and Giorgio Moroder's 'La Dolce Vita'. Throw in Lear's Bobby Pickett-like deep voice and it all adds up to a riot of spooky glam.

The French proto-supermodel shared a similar milieu to Grace Jones, who was also pursuing a breakout disco career at the time. Jones has had more longevity, though it was first blood to Lear – the album went Top 10 in France, German, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria. The pair even shared a split single of Jones' 'Do Or Die' and Lear's 'Run Baby Run' for a promotional push in Spain. That rare Island/Areola white label collaboration is worth a few bob now, unlike 'Sweet Revenge'.

I came across the LP thumbing through the five-euro floor crates at Superfly, my favourite Paris record shop. Lear on the cover, all in black in dominatrix pose, rang some bells – namely on Roxy Music's 'For Your Pleasure' where she's impossibly rangy, stalking a crepuscular city with a black panther on a leash. If the images both exert mystery, then Lear herself is a fascinating cultural figure whose life remains a riddle. Now either 83 or 84 years old, there are plenty of biographical discrepancies that she remains evasive about, such as her parentage and place of birth.

Lear was famously Salvador Dalí's muse, and a rumour about a change in her assigned gender at birth – which she and Dalí most likely cooked up – has never deserted her. Furthermore, Lear's place in rock 'n' roll is assured – she's The Rolling Stones' 'Miss Amanda Jones' from 1966, written by Jagger and Richards when she was dating Brian Jones. She was also briefly engaged to Bryan Ferry, and she had a relationship with David Bowie, which is deceptively significant to the path of electronic music. It was Lear who took Bowie to see Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis', sparking his lifelong fascination with German Expressionism. Arguably, no Lear – no Berlin trilogy.

JEREMY ALLEN

A MAN CALLED ADAM

The Girl With A Hole In Her Heart

OTHER

Teesside with a Balearic twist

I spent my early life in the yellow-skied haze of Teesside's toxic air. Memories abide of bomb sites untouched since the Second World War, weather-worn terraced houses, factory chimneys belching acrid smoke and beaches that stretched across an industrial horizon. It's not the environment normally associated with Balearic stalwarts A Man Called Adam, but on this astonishing album they manage to bring out the wildness and beauty of a space scarred variously by pollution, relentless bombing and merciless Thatcherite gutting.

'The Girl With A Hole In Her Heart' is the product of a lockdown return to AMCA's Teesside roots. Their first new album since 2019's 'Farmarama', it was born from their sound installation research outputs, then brought to fruition through a fusion of biographical sound stories, breezy pop tones and experiential field recordings. The effect is as mesmerising as it is unnerving, with ghosts of industrial pasts flowing through the present like rusty water.

Fitting then that the opening title track employs the sounds of electronic post-punk that ushered in Thatcher's 1980s. Here the motorik beats of crashing steel and pumping sequencers accompany a naive melody that offers stories from the beating heart of Teesside's Victorian terraces. Eventually turning into a twisted childhood skipping chant, it's simultaneously harsh and beautiful.

The oxymoron of beauty in ugliness and ugliness in beauty is ever-present throughout. 'Frankie's Theme' links Teesside to the post-industrial landscape of Chicago, fusing 80s UK electro-funk with early house and evoking memories of free parties in repurposed places. 'Over The Border' echoes the pounding beats of industry through brutally distorted and discordant brass band jazz, before 'Starlings' captures the miraculous sight of murmuration through the same landscape, where the jack hammers of 'Hidden Dragon' are also infiltrated by jazz motifs in free flight.

'Stochastic' offers windswept memories of seascapes interrupted by the disquieting ambience of "the works", while 'In Favour Of Storms' sets field recordings of thunder and dislocated voices against isolated piano, before 'It's Science Baby' closes the album with contaminated disco set in a decommissioned steelworks. This is a celebration of a place that wears its own difficult history with resilience and pride – and thumps to a truly danceable north-east England heartbeat.

MARTIN JAMES

MARTA SALOGNI & TOM RELLEEN - PHOTO: MARTA SALOGNI

MARTA SALOGNI & TOM RELLEEN

Music For Open Spaces

HANDS IN THE DARK

After Tom Relleen passed away from cancer in 2020, Marta Salogni declined to alter or mix their last collaborations together. And so, 'Music For Open Spaces' is a snapshot – a moment on the upswing of creativity, paused forever. Award-winning artist, producer, and engineer Salogni (Björk, Holly Herndon, Lucrecia Dalt) and musician and artist Relleen (Tomaga, The Oscillation) recorded in diverse locations including the Joshua Tree desert, the Cornish coastline, and their London home.

From the eerie rising dread of 'Giant Desert Cats' to the meandering spiritualism of 'Internal Logic II' and the burbling ricochets of 'pING poNGS' to the tentative thrum of 'Clocks', the album is a remarkable blend of experimental, ambient and electronic music. It evokes, by way of improvised sonics, contrasting physical and mental spaces, weaving between disparate panoramic places and alighting occasionally on the claustrophobic. Every track may be frozen in time, but each and every one is a profound testament to the power of collaboration, place and imagination. **AT**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

TCS-Various Artists-2

TEHRAN CONTEMPORARY SOUNDS

At 11 tracks deep, the second compilation from the Berlin-based label Tehran Contemporary Sounds (TCS) approaches twice the amount of material heard on their first outing, released in January 2020. If "contemporary sounds" doesn't narrow down the type of music you can expect to hear on the album, that is entirely intentional. It weaves through ambient, experimental avant-garde/music and off-kilter hip hop, and is as compelling as it is diverse.

From 'Slow Rango', Azu Tiwaline-collaborator Cinna Peyghamy's gristly opening passage, Ava Rasti's pensive rolling ambient piece, 'Route', takes us on a more sedate upward incline, motivated forward with delicately intoned bass. Temp-Illusion, the duo of sound artist Tegh and producer Bescolour, offer a highlight with 'Subdive'. Normally breaking backs with ruff-and-tuff distorted breaks and basslines, here their hallowed drones form an atmospheric cloud, which brings this vibrant collection to a gorgeous close. **FH**

THE METAMORPH

The Man On The 99th Floor

WERRA FOXMA

By night, Gavin Brick is the Eno-esque keyboard player in Pete Wylie's resurrected Mighty Wah. By day, it seems, he retreats to his own Brutalist mind palace to become The Metamorph, purveyor of starkly sinister synth earworms. Named in honour of a 1967 short story by JG Ballard, this pristine collection is as creepily insidious as Ballard's own tale of post-hypnotic skulduggery. From the throbbing electronic heartbeat of the opener 'Days Of Nemo', it's an album that mithers and niggles irresistibly.

Brick's own Edgar Froese-inspired workouts are augmented by the expressive, mercurial guitars of Robin "Scanner" Rimbaud, and it's a stroke of genius. The conversation begins on 'The Precipice', a grumbling ballet of pent-up foul temper. On 'Baroque Duel' it spills over into a dyspeptic argument between keyboard and fretboard, and by the time we reach 'Scandroids' it's clear both parties are reconciled to a dark future of dystopian bleakness. When Brick clicks his fingers, will we awake? Possibly, but the memories of this glacially beautiful album will take a long time to fade. **BF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
The Hidden Tapes
MINIMAL WAVE

One of the most sought-after and hard to find releases from a peerless electro-archaeological label, 2011's 'The Hidden Tapes' receives a welcome heavyweight vinyl reissue at last. Delivering hit after hit of pre-house, technoid electro and proto-industrial thrills, it's a compilation of rare, lost or unreleased minimal wave gems from the golden 1979-1985 period, many recorded on primitive 4-track tape in bedroom studios. No surprise then, that it all resounds with raw and edgy underground energy.

The choicest moments come from places like Japan, France, the former Yugoslavia and of course, the UK. In fact, Robert Lawrence and Mark Phillips' irresistibly pulsating, sequencer-built AI-warning 'Computer Bank' is among the best, buzzing with anarchic joy like an early Cabaret Voltaire number. Perhaps the standout comes via Tokyo though, and Sympathy Nervous, aka Kraftwerk obsessive Yosihumi Niinuma. His 1980 'Polaroid' features his brother's vocals transformed by some hybrid vocoder into a dysregulated robotic mantra, and will blow you away. Essential machine music. **CG**

GLENN ASTRO
Nothing Is Real
TARTELET

Mix albums. Their power lies in their apparent accessibility – everyone with a CD burner could be an artist – but the reality is different. There's a reason why works like 'Journeys By DJ: Coldcut – 70 Minutes Of Madness' are so highly esteemed.

With 'Nothing Is Real', German producer Glenn Astro multiplies the challenge. This chill-out mix attempts to reach the high-water mark by compiling tracks by a number of entirely imaginary artists, each a fictional alias of Astro.

The result is a captivating journey through downtempo (DJ 1999's 'The Abyss'), ambient techno (The Foundation's 'I Like It'), 808 State-style techno (Brain Liquor's 'Jaque?') and broken beat (the hushed drum 'n' bass stylings of the album highlight 'The Growl' by Crystaline Reality). It's expertly woven together to create a unique and immersive listening experience.

Glenn Astro has always been driven by a fierce eclecticism, happily blending house with disco and hip hop beats (exemplified on his work with Max Graef on 2016's 'The Yard Work Simulator' for Ninja Tune). On 'Nothing Is Real', he takes the fractured shards of his multifaceted chill-out room personality and reassembles them into a glittering whole. **AT**

DETLEF FUNDER & BERND SEVENS
STUMM
TAL

Resurrected by Stefan Schneider's TAL label and now available for the first time on vinyl and digitally, 'STUMM' is a wonderfully intimate and vivid snapshot of Düsseldorf's nascent post-punk scene. STUMM was the duo of Detlef Funder and Bernd Sevens, who later became better-known under their respective Konrad Kraft and Seventh Day names. Back in 1980 though, it was just Funder and Sevens in a rehearsal studio in central Düsseldorf, capturing their spontaneous and exploratory sound experiments on a 4-track tape machine.

The opener 'Sauerstoffmangel' sets the scene – unadorned and unfussy, but buzzing with promise. With a modest toolkit – Korg MS-20 synth, Roland CR-78 drum machine, electronic effects and drum kit – STUMM created a kind of sonic time capsule, showcasing the glorious future possibilities of post-punk and electronic music.

On tracks like 'Koma', industrial rhythms emerge in a playful stop-start fashion. It's a bit like a game of Jenga, a lively process of trial and error with proto-techno as the soundtrack. **CF**

GREG FOAT & GIGI MASIN

Dolphin

STRUT

Like-minded talents' ocean glide

Until quite recently, ex-Venetian postal worker and veteran new age ambient maestro Gigi Masin remained a criminally under-appreciated talent. Thankfully, after a number of widely acclaimed late-phase releases and reissues over the past few years, he's suddenly being cited as a paramount figure for a number of contemporary "anti-dystopian" ambient and neoclassical musicians – his principal partner here, the celebrated jazz pianist Greg Foat, included.

Foat names Masin's seminal 1986 album 'Wind' as a prime influence, while the latter equally praises Foat's 2020 work 'Symphonie Pacifique' as a more recent inspiration. It seems natural then that the pair should collaborate. And here, aided by gifted drummer Moses Boyd and fellow British nu jazz luminary and bassist Tom Herbert, they conjure a marriage of disciplines that meld together in startling alchemical fashion.

'Dolphin' is an exquisitely crafted start-to-finish triumph, its poised jazz elements adding nuanced complexity to Masin's vaporous melodic textures. The thing that really swings it though, is the episodic distinctiveness of individual tracks that are still able to flow with liquid perfection.

Some clearly come from the searching mind of Masin, such as the cosmically beatific, cinematic scene-setter 'Lee', while others are driven by the vital energy of Foat, Boyd, and Herbert whose pulsating heavyweight basslines in particular guide 'London Nights' into the sunset with incredible agility.

Boyd holds it all together with head-turning elan on the outstanding title track. His sure percussive hand anchors Foat's grand piano and vintage synths to the floating mellifluous tones of the flute and Masin's electric keyboard, while further in, the seductive, pastel-coloured simplicity of 'Sabena' drifts away on an easy, tranquil sea.

Some would argue that transporting, mood-enhancing instrumental music like this feels ultimately superficial given the challenging times we're living in. But existing in a perpetual state of anxious disillusionment and oppositional anger is good for none of us, and this strong dose of radiant light, healing energy and borderless creativity is just the medicine – make no mistake.

CARL GRIFFIN

Label Profile

TAL

Label: TAL
Location: Düsseldorf
Est: 2016

Potted History: "In 2014, we stopped working together with To Rococo Rot which gave me free space to start something new," explains electronic producer, musician and TAL label founder Stefan Schneider. "At around the same time, I also finished a series called 'Enthusiasm' at the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus – the main theatre in Düsseldorf – where we organised a series of events that would bring together fine arts, theatre music and politics. Somehow, I wanted to continue the curatorial work I'd been doing for three years by then, and the label was a way of doing that."

Mission Statement: "When the first record of Ogoya Nengo And The Dodo Women's Group was released in 2016, I still had no idea what the second would be. I just knew I did not want to establish a label that would be devoted to only one type of music."

Key Artists & Releases: "The most recent release is 'STUMM' from the duo of Detlef Funder and Bernd Sevens, who both became pivotal figures in the underground tape movement of West Germany when they launched the SDV label in 1986. Individually they went on to produce boundary-defying works as Konrad Kraft and Seventh Day respectively.

"Other releases have included Konrad Kraft's 'Accident In Heaven' and 'Arctica', 'Musica De Venezuela 1972-81' by the self-taught sound engineer and ethnomusicologist Oswaldo Lares, Tentenko's 'An Antworten' EP with original tracks plus remixes by Nika Son, Tolouse Low Trax and MM/KM, So Sner's 'Reime' with Susanna Gartmayer on bass clarinet and myself on electronics, and music by the pioneering Japanese group NON BAND."

Future Plans: "The catalogue of TAL should be as diverse as a John Peel radio show," says Schneider. "He was wonderful at bringing fully different kinds of music together in a way that would open your ears and mind to still-unfamiliar territories – music-wise, but also politically and historically."

Any Other Business? "Besides releasing music, I think it is more important than ever to invent places where different kinds of people can physically meet, exchange ideas and fantasies and try new things out. Something like Morphine Raum in Berlin – a recording studio, record label, project space and workshop – is a good example for this."

For more, visit tal-label.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always

Bendik Giske on the first and last albums he bought, and one he always returns to

FIRST

CYPRESS HILL

Black Sunday

RUFFHOUSE/COLUMBIA, 1993

"It was definitely the first album I bought – twice. I remember the feeling of defiantly purchasing it for the second time, in the only cassette shop in Ubud in Indonesia, after my first copy was confiscated due to the parental advisory label. My first act of musical defiance. Those screeching sounds, which still haunt me, may have inspired the uncontrolled squeaks that make up my sonic universe today."

LAST

SHABAKA HUTCHINGS

Afrikan Culture

IMPULSE!, 2022

"The most recent album I bought is Shabaka Hutchings' 'Afrikan Culture', which I've been playing on repeat. An album with a forward-leaning title, exploring a number of different flutes, it's as if Hutchings is diving into memory through oral tradition. A standout track for me is 'Ital Is Vital' which, to my ears, is an exploration in rhyme and rhythm, played with a love for the craft."

ALWAYS

AUTECHRE

Chiastic Slide

WARP, 1997

"I have too many favourites to mention, but 'Chiastic Slide' by Autechre stands out as an eye-opener I keep coming back to. Like an immersion into the rhythmic and sonic tensions of heavy machinery, the ongoing momentum with gravitational force make listening to this album like experiencing something that's always been there. It's a perspective that was made evident by the deep digging of its authors."

BENDIK GISKE

Bendik Giske

SMALLTOWN SUPERSOUND

Album number three is a captivating triumph

The story goes that Norwegian saxophonist Bendik Giske took a fateful visit to Berlin's Berghain nightclub and was so smitten by the hard techno sounds he was hearing that his relationship with his instrument was irrevocably transformed. His goal wasn't to recreate dance music as such, but to find a way of isolating and expressing its energy through his playing. The result was 'Surrender', released in 2019 – a bold, adventurous and vital debut, fully inverting preconceptions about the saxophone and its perennial association with jazz. Then, in 2021 came the stunning 'Cracks' – "a sparkling and sensual reimagining of how saxophone music can sound".

When approaching the pieces on his self-titled third album, it's important to keep in mind that Giske is both a saxophonist and a performance artist. That brings a specific physicality to his music, with complex rhythms typically crafted from playing the body of the instrument like a drum. He is a live performer, with each of the pieces here created in single takes using looping to create the layers. Add in the talents of acclaimed electronic musician Beatrice Dillon as producer, and the result is music that nods to the mechanical intensity of techno, yet which is grounded in the rudiments of classical minimalism.

This approach manifests itself best on 'Rhizome', where short, insistent cyclical passages evoke the essence of Philip Glass. And just to confound expectation, those circular moments are grounded by a rattling percussive foundation and a steady metronomic bass pulse.

'Not Yet' is one of the most mesmerising and unfathomable examples of Giske's discipline, presenting itself as both ruthlessly controlled and also finely balanced on the precipice of disarray. His playing here has a filtered quality as if approximating a wildly tweaked 303, while another section contains a grainy, distorted, squealing sound that sounds like an angry Korg MS-20.

Another highlight is 'Slipping', which is focused on a rapid percussive mesh of pointillist Geiger counter pulses. Giske's sax here is all about latent potential, existing as short gestures that occasionally rise up temptingly out of the background.

It would surely be enticing and expected for Giske to use programmed beats and sequences. That he manages to isolate the DNA of dance music through the saxophone alone is the product of a questing, art-punk spirit – one that brilliantly and wilfully refuses to acknowledge either convention or limits.

MAT SMITH

SCHNEIDER TM

SCHNEIDER TM
Ereignishorizont
KARLRECORDS

On his 2012 album, 'Construction Sounds', Schneider TM – German musician Dirk Dresselhaus – fashioned building site sounds into captivating concrete structures, blocks of vertical sonics towering out of ground-level grind. On 'Ereignishorizont', he ups the scale, focusing instead on cosmic deconstruction. The album's title translates as 'Event Horizon', the point at which light and matter can no longer escape from a black hole. Its eight pieces get straight to the big crunch.

The title track and opener is a colossal slab of sustained drone orbited by percussive detritus, before 'Schwarzschild-Radius' spaghettifies the tension into one sustained thread. Pieces such as the rhythmic and dense 'Holomechanik' recall the moody heaviness of experimental musician Aidan Baker, but their sheer sense of scale is distinct. As a speculation on such cosmic matters, Dresselhaus eschews the usual melodramatic orchestral cliches, opting instead for prolonged swathes of drone which exude heat and pressure, and vibrate with an intense sense of doom, as though quivering on the event horizon itself. **ST**

PET SHOP BOYS
Smash – The Singles 1985-2020
PARLOPHONE

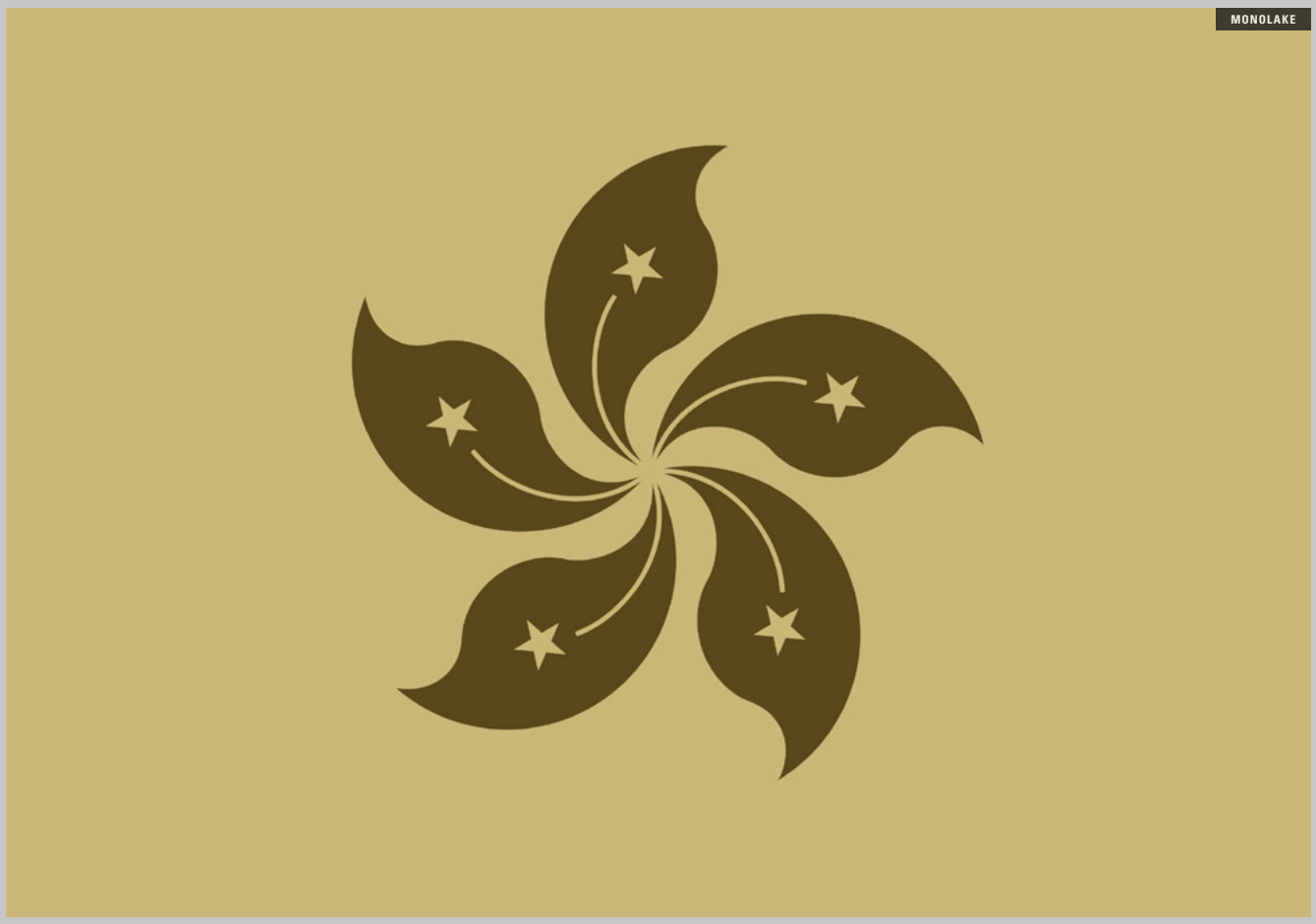
Both literally and figuratively, it's all here. All the singles, all the beats, all the melodies, all the drama, all the wit, but also, of course, all of life. From the bouncepop debut 'West End Girls' through to 2020's subtle hymn to Friday night escape, 'I Don't Wanna', with a cool eye, Neil Tennant combines wordplay and empathy to chronicle the inner worlds of his characters, while the constantly evolving music of his co-conspirator, Chris Lowe, lures you onto the dancefloor.

There's more here though than the classics. 'Smash' is an opportunity for the new/lapsed/fair-weather fan to discover that the Pet Shop Boys' pop nous never abandoned them. Check out the infectious house piano flecks of 'Thursday' (with Example), the effervescent swing of 'Dreamland' (with Years & Years) or the gloriously over the top, Michael Nyman-quoting, hi-NRG thrill that is 'Love Is A Bourgeois Construct'. It may seem easy, but don't take them for granted – this is a smashing achievement. **AT**

MATTHEW HERBERT X LONDON CONTEMPORARY ORCHESTRA
The Horse
MODERN RECORDINGS/BMG

The striking concept behind this compelling album takes us right back to the Neolithic age and the very roots of culture and music. The horse in question is sonically explored in full-size skeletal form by Herbert, the esteemed left-field dance music and film score composer, DJ and producer, who here works alongside a cast of elite musicians, including The Comet Is Coming mastermind Shabaka Hutchings and Polar Bear's Seb Rochford.

The main body of the album was made using instruments such as thighbone flutes, which reference the earliest known instruments made from bird bones many thousands of years ago, and bows made from rib and horse hair. We're initiated into this unique sound world with the starkly primitive, ritualistic atmospherics of 'The Horse's Bones Are In A Cave', before careering into 'The Horse Is Put To Work' with its melodic crescendos of propulsive electroacoustics. Fusing techno minimalism with some blinding future-jazz, it'll leave you speechless. Talk about dem bones. **CG**



MONOLAKE
Hong Kong
FIELD

It's easy to overlook the power of dub techno, but for anyone curious about this style – the popularity of which has ebbed and flowed since the early 1990s – this reissue of early singles from 1997 by producers Robert Henke and Gerhard Behles, originally released on the now-classic Chain Reaction label, is an excellent place to start.

'Cyan' opens up with rainforest sound effects before giving way to a twitchy pulse and a gentle synth wash. 'Lantau' goes even further down the minimal route, being little more than just a hiss, percussive effects and a synth pattern. 'Macao' is merely scuttling pitter-patter beats. You get the picture – hands in the air anthems are conspicuous by their absence. This is music to lose yourself in. Concentrate, and you'll find yourself happily bewitched by the subtly shifting drum patterns, and before you know it half an hour has passed by. It's deceptively simple and fiendishly difficult to get right, but Henke and Behles are masters of their craft. **WS**

PHILIP JECK & CHRIS WATSON
Oxmardyke
TOUCH

'Oxmardyke' pairs sound artists Chris Watson and the late Philip Jeck. Though they never worked together, the two would often meet for drinks at the Philharmonic Dining Rooms in Liverpool where, according to Watson, they would look for "a place where our ideas converged". That place turned out to be the Oxmardyke level crossing and signal box (sadly now gone), which Watson recorded while undertaking another project around the Humber Estuary in 2017.

Shortly before he passed away in March 2022, Jeck began distressing Watson's sounds from his hospital bed. The nine pieces here range from relatively unadorned, gently altered field recordings ('Oxmardyke') through to more complex and heavily processed pieces ('AH', 'Spurn'). With 'Beetroot Train', Jeck focuses on a faltering rhythm, creating a suppressed version of dance music that progressively and dramatically unravels. A solitary, highly poignant collaboration, and a fitting testament to Jeck's singular approach to sound manipulation. **MS**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
No ComplY — A Gaza Skatepark Fundraiser Compilation
EXIST

'No ComplY' pulls together notable musicians from the Arab orient and African regions to raise funds for Skate Gaza, a collective of young skaters in the Gaza Strip, to help them repair a skate park damaged during military bombardments. Just days after the launch of the fundraiser, the Palestinian Authority in Gaza demolished the existing park, and the team are now faced with higher costs to refurbish a more distant site.

Beyond the cause itself, there are nine damn good reasons to get behind this and support the compilation. MC Yallah submits a killer track, even by her own high standards, with regular sparring partner Debmaster ('Kabitutte'). So too do Yao Bobby & Simon Grab ('Fagnan'), their blistering sound drawn from no-input mixing techniques. Palestinian talent is also here in force. 'Irbak', by the legendary Muqata'a, is a highlight of deconstructed hip hop in his own inimitable style – tense and ready to burst into a boiling sound collage. **FH**

CRAVEN FAULTS

Standers

THE LEAF LABEL

Analogue electronics from Northern terrain

Since 2017, fuelled by a myriad of perfectly formed EPs and an acclaimed 2020 album, 'Erratics & Unconformities', speculation has been mounting. Who *is* Craven Faults? Well, let's look at the clues. It's someone obsessed with the windswept topography of West Yorkshire, because the hypnotic 15-minute opener 'Hurrocstanes' takes its title from the loosely assembled cairns used as boundary markers on rain-soaked moorland plateaus.

It's also someone with more than a passing interest in Nordic mythology, because the industrial beats of the 10-minute closing track, 'Odda Delf', are infused with the spirits of the Norse deities whose unforgiving presence seeped into the Yorkshire landscape from the early medieval period onwards.

Previous releases, meanwhile, suggest a fascination with the lingering remains – both physical and economic – of abandoned textile mills and decommissioned collieries. All things considered, it's probably not Taylor Swift.

The anonymity has certainly fuelled Craven Faults' reputation, but it shouldn't detract from the majesty of the music. As the clamour for a great unveiling grows, 'Standers' ascends into ever more glorious isolation, eschewing the minutiae of a sadly moribund industry for a solitary life in the shadow of lonely megaliths. 'Meers & Hushes' is modular melancholy, the sound of March winds whipping across ancient trackways. 'Idols And Altars' adds wistful, elegiac piano chords to the electronic hummadruz and gazes wistfully across patchwork fields and belching chimneys to a cluster of ancient stone sentinels on the horizon.

At the heart of the album is the 18-minute 'Sun Vein Strings', a jagged symphony for buzzsaw synth and the wailing, distorted spectre of an antiquated Farfisa organ. Like the best moorland walks, it's four seasons in one bloody day – evolving from blue-skied optimism to face-stinging sleet and back again.

Will we ever find out who's hiding beneath the cagoule? Well, it's a matter of months until Craven Faults is scheduled to make four sold-out live appearances at a restored Victorian water mill on the outskirts of Leeds. If the anonymity somehow remains, that's commendable in its own right. But if the mask (and the woolly hat) slips, let's look them in the eye and say heartfelt thanks for an album that – like the Yorkshire landscape itself – is both forbidding and beautiful in equal measure.

BOB FISCHER

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Silberland Vol 2: The Driving Side Of Kosmische Musik 1974-1984

BUREAU B

Journeying down the motorik highway

Bureau B has been intrepidly unearthing and reanimating music from the fringes of krautrock since 2005. The Hamburg imprint brings out new material too, though even when it doesn't, Gunther Buskies' label somehow retains a strange evergreen vitality. The founder's enthusiasm, and the expertise that goes into the output as well as the usual high quality of what's on offer, means Bureau B releases feel more alive than archival.

That case is no better exemplified than on their latest compilation 'Silberland Vol 2: The Driving Side Of Kosmische Musik 1974-1984', which explores the outer limits of musical motion with a sense of ebullience. German experimental music made by the generation after the war is often looked upon as slightly earnest, made by boffins in labs, a reaction to the transgressions of the previous generation. While that can sometimes be the case, 'Silberland Vol 2' is a riot of fun with no apparent ulterior motive other than to make people dance.

Last year's excellent 'Silberland Vol 1: The Psychedelic Side Of Kosmische Musik 1972-1986' was interested, broadly speaking, in the sonically kaleidoscopic. Here we move in a more straightforward and propulsive manner, though unsurprisingly the overlap is significantly high. The stomping adrenaline rush of 'Feedback 66' by Moebius & Plank is more far out than many of its predecessors on the 'Vol 1' compilation, and the spacey explorations of Conrad Schnitzler on 'Elektroklang' are stratospheric as well as motorik.

Naturally, we have a Dinger – though it's Thomas rather than Klaus – on the brisk synthpop of 'Für Dich'. And there are arpeggios aplenty over a proto-breakbeat by the mysterious You, featuring Harald Grosskopf as Lhan Gopal on drums. Grosskopf also appears as himself on the opener 'Eve On The Hill' – the lead track from his excellent 'Oceanheart' album, reissued earlier this year.

Bureau B could have been regarded as an upstart until quite recently, though the label is beginning to settle into its status as one of Europe's finest purveyors of electronica, avant-garde, post-rock, neoclassical and krautrock. And this second 'Silberland' instalment is as entertaining a compilation as you're ever likely to find covering the 10-year period between 1974 and 1984, a stunning representation of a turbulent but immensely creative era. Now that's cosmic.

JEREMY ALLEN

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BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

A Man Called Adam's **Sally Rodgers** and **Steve Jones** take on this month's round of quick-fire questions

INTERVIEW: NEIL MASON

Hello Sally, where are you right now and what can you see?
"I'm at my kitchen table looking out the window – my favourite spot. The bird feeders are a few feet away and they kind of zen me when I'm working."

What brought you home to Teesside?
"I bought a house here just before we released our last album 'Farmarama' in 2019. My mum's getting older and all roads were leading home."

Tell me a little bit about your upbringing
"My mum and dad ran working men's clubs when I was growing up. It's not normal to live in a house attached to a venue that's open 10 hours a day, but it was a lot of fun. I couldn't understand what was funny about 'Phoenix Nights' when it first came out, it all just seemed normal to me."

Why is being home resonating so much with you now?
"I honestly don't know. I was always on the move, but the pandemic stopped us in our tracks and I enjoyed the peace of it. I have the raging North Sea to ground me now. I can hear it from my bedroom at night."

It's a very different-sounding AMCA on this record. What's changed?
"We've never made an album with a sense of place before. We did a mix and blog post about Teesside for Caught By The River during lockdown, and it was a blend of Northern indie, field recordings, electronica, dance and ambient. Although it was other people's music, we saw it as a kind of template when we started writing."

Robin Dale, who worked in and around Teesside in the 1970s, did the publicity photos. What's the appeal of his work?
"When I was little, we lived in Grangetown in the shadow of British Steel, ICI and all the heavy industry. I used to play on the slag heaps and one of Robin's pictures – a kid with a milk bottle looking over the industrial scrubland – felt like it could have been me. The girls on the 'Starlings' sleeve reminded me of my sister and her friends."

On tracks like 'Hidden Dragon' you can hear the industry – like in Detroit techno
"Teesside is quite like Detroit – ha! Heavily industrial, quite deprived and a bit forgotten by the outside world. But from those circumstances amazing things like techno happened so…"

You've been making field recordings of the North East's vanishing industrial heritage?
"Yeah, it's been pretty incredible watching the old steel works come down. We used the footage for the 'Girl With A Hole In Her Heart' video and some of the audio is in the album mix."

To me, this all adds up to a proper, fully formed artist album
"We're an odd band really. We're very much rooted in dance music and faithful to it, but we're not afraid to push ourselves and let the world hear what we make, even if it doesn't conform to any particular genre. In that way it is an artist album and maybe our most confident. It's nice to hear you say that though, thank you."

When we talk about AMCA, Steve doesn't get a look-in. Does he mind?
"He has quite a serious academic career. We each do what we need to and are happy with our roles."

I've got a few questions for him, for once. Hello Steve, where are you right now and what can you see?
"In my flat, looking at pots of vegetable plants I'm hardening up to go on the AMCA allotment."

Do you mind Sally hogging the limelight?
"Do you think she does? We know each other's strengths and Sally is the natural communicator."

What's the appeal of Teesside for you?
"I used to live in Paris, but it got harder to live there – I don't need to tell you why. I moved to Teesside last year to begin teaching, but I've known the area for years because of Sally's connections. I've always loved the landscape – the sea, the industry – and people here are funny and unpretentious."

Why so much piano on the new record?
"I started playing again during lockdown, first as a form of self-care, then as the ideas came I began recording stuff on a Zoom recorder. Very lo-fi."

The deep house revival starts here, eh?
"Is it a revival? Did it ever go away?"

'Stochastic' sounds like a modular jam – are you coming over to the dark side?
"Yes, it's a modular jam using a VCV Rack. I know we're associated with Ibiza sunsets, but there's always been a dirty electronic side to us."

The title track comes on like The Human League. Were they a big influence on you?
Steve: "'The Sound Of The Crowd' was one of the first singles I bought, and I always loved the claim on the cover that no real instruments were used."
Sally: "That Northern dance sound – The Human League, Heaven 17, Blancmange – was definitely an influence. We're a duo with a synth player and a front person – what ya gonna do!"

Finally, did the girl next door really have a hole in her heart?
Sally: "Actually she lived down the road, I can even remember her name. There was also a lady in the street who had her gallstones in a jar on the mantelpiece. I remember finding both ideas fascinating. I don't want to upset anyone who has that serious heart condition by seeming glib about it, but for me it was an evocative image from my childhood and a handy, if opaque, metaphor."

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